

2019 Call for Proposals

Brief Proposal Deadline: July 25, 2019



Equity-Focused Policy Research

BUILDING EVIDENCE ON ACCESS TO EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION FOR LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

BACKGROUND

Research shows that the earliest years of life are a critical period of human development. Young children's earliest relationships and experiences have a strong influence on brain development and future health and well-being ([Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University 2016](#)). Young children's foundational relationships and experiences occur in the context of families and communities. Yet, low-income families often do not have access to the basic necessities and resources to foster the nurturing experiences and stimulating environments that young children need to thrive. These circumstances are especially likely to affect families of color; families living in rural areas; and other groups of families who experience gaps in access to resources needed to support their children's health and well-being. What is needed are policies that support low-income families by providing stimulating and nurturing environments to promote their children's healthy physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development—and their children's future success in school and life.

Most families with young children need access to early care and education (ECE) to support children's development and parents' ability to work or attend school. However, many families—particularly low-income families; families of color; those living in geographically isolated areas; and those with varying or nontraditional work schedules—face barriers to access because they cannot afford ECE; live in areas that lack services that meet families' needs; or cannot navigate complex program administration.

As part of its efforts to create a [Culture of Health](#) in the United States, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) seeks to identify and promote high-value, high-impact policy changes that can help low-income families support the healthy development of their young children. This objective reflects the Foundation's belief that good health is a right, not a privilege, and its focus on achieving health equity (Grob 2018). [Health equity](#) means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. This requires removing obstacles to health, such as poverty and discrimination, and their consequences (Braveman et al. 2017). In a Culture of Health, everyone has the opportunity to live a healthier life, no matter who we are, where we live, or how much money we make.

To guide decision-making about policies that will advance equity and support low-income families with young children, RWJF worked with Mathematica Policy Research to develop a policy research agenda. The goal of this agenda is to generate evidence to inform policymaking that can better support families with young children. RWJF will focus on three policy areas as providing critical resources for these families: (1) access to early care and education (ECE); (2)

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income supports (such as the Earned Income Tax Credit [EITC] and cash transfer programs); and (3) nutrition supports (such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP]).

The research agenda identifies gaps in the literature and our understanding of how policies affect low-income families. It also suggests key questions for researchers to address in order to fill gaps in the literature and our understanding of each policy area—as well as cross-cutting questions about how families combine multiple supports and how different policies and programs interact to affect access to supports. The questions proposed in the research agenda focus on: (1) understanding the sources of disparities in families' access to and use of key supports; (2) identifying and testing innovations to reduce disparities and advance equity; and (3) strategies for scaling up policies and programs that are effective in reducing disparities and advancing equity.

Briefs summarizing the research agenda in each policy area and cross-cutting research questions are available [here](#). Applicants are strongly encouraged to review these briefs.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this funding opportunity is to support action-oriented research that advances health equity, builds the knowledge base, and informs policymaking to increase **access to ECE** for low-income families. We define ECE as formal and informal nonparental care for children birth to age 5. Families have access to ECE when they are able to find affordable ECE that supports their child's development and meets the families' needs (Friese et al. 2017). However, many families struggle with ECE access because they cannot afford ECE or live in areas that lack services (sometimes called "child care deserts") (NAS 2018; The Brookings Institution 2017; Malik & Hamm 2017). Families of color are also less likely to access ECE (The Brookings Institution 2017; Schmit & Walker 2016).

Increasing access to ECE may reduce poverty in households with young children by supporting parental employment; provide critical resources to help families support children's development; diminish families' stress levels; and thereby advance health equity. (RWJF is supporting research on the two other policy areas addressed in the research agenda—access to income supports and nutrition supports. A separate call for proposals on income supports was released in April 2019, and a call on nutrition supports is forthcoming. Evidence generated through funded projects should inform practice and policy, and guide practitioners and policymakers (federal, state, and local) in setting priorities and allocating resources.

The Foundation is interested in research that examines a diverse set of policies and programs because funding for ECE comes from a variety of federal, state, local, and private sources—including Head Start; Early Head Start; the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF); the child and dependent care tax credit; state and district pre-kindergarten programs; and tuition or copayments that parents pay. Moreover, parents have needs and preferences for different types of ECE, including regulated center and home-based ECE; care from family, friends, and neighbors; and care during standard and nonstandard hours that align with parents' work schedules.

Research funded under this opportunity might clarify the reasons for disparities in ECE access; evaluate innovations that may improve ECE access and participation for disadvantaged populations through policy change or implementation; review strategies for scaling up effective policies and innovations; or explore new measures to monitor progress toward achieving equity in access to key supports.

Although we recognize the importance of identifying the magnitude of gaps in access to supports and disparate outcomes for families—for this call for proposals, we are prioritizing research that (a) illuminates the policy- and practice-related *reasons for* or *drivers* of disparities in access to early care and education; and (b) identifies current policy and programmatic solutions or needed changes that promote equity.

We also recognize the importance of research on improving the quality of ECE, because high-quality ECE can improve children's developmental outcomes (Schweinhart et al. 1993; Campbell et al. 2002; Yoshikawa et al. 2013).

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Moreover, issues of ECE access and quality are related, because families need access to ECE that meets their needs for care and supports their children’s development (Friese et al. 2017). There is also differential access to quality, given affordability and availability to parents. This call for proposals prioritizes research on families’ access to affordable, high-quality ECE. In recent years, extensive investments have been made at the federal and state level to support quality in ECE (Tout et al. 2010), with relatively less focus on research about how to increase equitable access to this vital resource.

What We Hope to Learn and Share

We aim to fund a body of research that will illuminate strategies and policies that enhance families’ access to ECE and that promote outcomes that are relevant to achieving health equity. Research funded under this opportunity may focus on questions posed in the research agenda included in this CFP **or related questions that applicants propose**. As described in the [brief summarizing the research agenda on early care and education](#), researchers may use a variety of designs to address these questions. Proposed projects may incorporate quantitative analyses and/or qualitative methods that bring forward the voices and experiences of families affected by inequities. If projects are specific to a particular context or jurisdiction, researchers should identify the implications for generalizability of practice and policy solutions beyond that context or jurisdiction.

Table 1 below provides examples of equity-focused research questions on increasing equitable access to affordable, high-quality ECE, as well as potential methods for addressing them. As noted above, the questions below are *examples* and applicants *may propose other questions* that are relevant to the purpose of the research agenda and funding opportunity and the policies and programs of interest.

Table 1. Examples of research questions on increasing equitable access to ECE

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Research questions	Potential methods
What are the reasons for disparities in ECE access and participation by ECE type Head Start; pre-K; center-based child care; licensed family child care; exempt (family, friend, and neighbor care) for different subgroups of children (race/ethnicity, income, rural/urban, immigration status)? For example, how do barriers related to information, supply, transportation, trust, preference, parental work hours, or cost affect different subgroups of families?	<p>Conduct in-depth analysis of disparities in access and participation in one or more states using administrative data on ECE or other sources.</p> <p>Conduct surveys or focus groups with parents in selected subgroups and states.</p> <p>Conduct qualitative interviews with state and local ECE and subsidy administrators and Child Care Resource & Referral staff.</p>
How do state subsidy policies influence disparities in access to ECE? How do these policies interact with licensing regulations to affect ECE supply? How do the new CCDF regulations issued in 2016 affect disparities in access to ECE? For example, how do background check requirements and the new 12-month eligibility policy affect access?	<p>Link case-level information on children receiving subsidies with detailed policy information from the CCDF policy database.</p> <p>Compare changes in participation for states implementing new CCDF policies versus states with waivers.</p> <p>Conduct simulations of the effects of different policy options.</p>
How do subsidy reimbursement rates affect ECE supply and disparities in access?	<p>Compare participation rates for subgroups of families in states with different CCDF reimbursement policies.</p> <p>Model effects of changes in reimbursement rates on uptake among different subgroups of families through policy simulations.</p>
Do differences in how states target pre-K services (for example, through universal, targeted, or hybrid pre-K eligibility policies) affect disparities in access?	Compare pre-K participation rates for subgroups of families in states with universal, targeted, or hybrid pre-K eligibility policies.
What state and local policies show potential for increasing the supply of ECE in rural areas and other child care deserts? Do these policies increase equitable access?	<p>Conduct a small demonstration and outcomes study to explore whether promising policies (such as facilities grant programs or shared services alliances) increase the number of ECE providers in selected communities.</p> <p>Develop and test strategies for improving or expanding ECE facilities, such as grants for facility assessment and improvement in an underserved locality.</p>
What policies can improve access to ECE for families that need care during nonstandard hours?	<p>Conduct parent focus groups to understand parents' needs and preferences for care during nonstandard hours.</p> <p>Develop and test innovations in a formative study.</p>
Can state-level coordination of diverse ECE financing mechanisms increase equitable access?	<p>Conduct a descriptive study of local or state financing initiatives.</p> <p>Compare potential strategies for state-level coordination.</p>
Which funding mechanisms increase ECE supply and equitable access to ECE? Are mechanisms focused on families (tax credits, vouchers, copays) or providers (contracts, grants)?	<p>Conduct an outcomes study of whether contracts and grants to providers increase supply and increase equitable access.</p> <p>Examine variation in states' use of different funding mechanisms and implications for equitable access.</p>

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Equitable Evaluation

The Foundation is also interested in funding projects that incorporate participatory approaches to research and that use evaluation as a tool for advancing equity by applying [principles of equitable evaluation](#). Equitable evaluation is an approach that highlights the potential for research and evaluation to contribute to equity. Its core principles are that: (1) evaluation should advance equity; (2) evaluation should answer questions about contributors to inequity; the effect of a strategy or policy on different populations and drivers of inequity; and the role of cultural context in an initiative; and (3) evaluations should be multiculturally valid and encourage participant ownership ([Center for Evaluation Innovation 2017](#)). RWJF believes that applying principles of equitable evaluation will help leverage evaluation as a driver of health equity and build a cadre of researchers with diverse backgrounds and expertise who can illuminate the historical and cultural contexts that may be important for understanding and addressing inequities.

Successful applicants will be expected to produce research reports that are accessible to a broad audience, develop a dissemination plan, and participate in targeted dissemination activities.

TOTAL AWARDS

- We will make approximately 10 awards through this funding opportunity, totaling \$1.5 million. We expect that awards will range from \$50,000 to \$500,000 each.
- For projects that involve primary data collection through surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, and other methods (or a combination of methods), applicants may request up to \$250,000, for a project duration of up to 24 months.
- For projects that rely solely on secondary data analyses, applicants may request up to \$75,000, for a project duration of up to 12 months.
- For projects that involve implementing and testing innovative strategies to expand access to ECE, participatory research methods, and/or substantial community partnerships, applicants may request up to \$500,000, for a project duration of up to 30 months. The Foundation intends to make up to one award of this size.
- Applicants should request amounts that are consistent with the scope and complexity of the research questions and methods they propose and for carrying out research methods aligned with the principles of equitable evaluation.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Eligible applicant organizations include academic institutions, public entities and private nonprofit organizations, state and local government agencies, and for-profit organizations. All organizations must be based in the United States or its territories. Applicants also may represent partnerships between service providers or practitioners and researchers.

OUR EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION COMMITMENT

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is committed to building a Culture of Health that provides everyone in America a fair and just opportunity for health and well-being. Achieving this goal requires focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion. To that end, we are committed to fostering diverse perspectives. We recognize that individuals' perspectives are shaped by a host of factors, such as their race, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, age, socioeconomic status, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, familial status, education, religion, legal status, military service, political affiliation, geography, and other personal and professional experiences.

We know that the presence of diverse perspectives alone is not sufficient. Therefore, we also are committed to creating inclusive environments where all individuals are encouraged to share their perspectives and experiences.

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We believe that only through valuing our differences and similarities, and remaining vigilant in advancing equity, will we be able to maintain an equitable workplace and actively pursue equity in all aspects of our work. We commit to being continuous learners and working alongside others to cultivate equity, diversity, and inclusion.

SELECTION CRITERIA

We will evaluate proposals based on the following criteria:

- **Relevance to the research agenda and policy.** Although applicants may focus on questions not specified in the research agenda, proposed studies should align with the overall objectives of the research agenda and the policy areas and topics the agenda addresses. In particular, proposed studies should have clear implications for supports that advance health equity and should inform decision-making by policymakers and practitioners.
- **Focus on action-oriented research.** Proposed studies should produce results in the near term that can address key knowledge gaps and inform policymakers' and stakeholders' priorities and decisions. Proposed studies should not solely describe disparities or suggest a need for further research. Rather, the studies should add to the knowledge base on policies, programs, and strategies for increasing equity in access and outcomes related to key supports for low-income families.
- **Feasibility.** Applications should demonstrate that the proposed studies can be completed within the expected time frame and budget and should indicate reasonable time lines for collecting and/or analyzing data. Applications should demonstrate that data for analysis is accessible, particularly if secondary data analyses are proposed. If the proposed study focuses on an innovative intervention, the application should reflect reasonable assumptions regarding the time and effort required for both implementing and evaluating the intervention. The application should demonstrate that teams have identified potential challenges to completing the proposed study and considered how they will be addressed.

Applications that include partnerships among multiple organizations should provide evidence of the strength of the partnerships; for example, a history of successful collaboration.

- **Quality of the proposed design.** Applications should clearly state the research questions of interest and describe how they will be answered, including measures to be used; data sources; data collection methods and timeline; and analysis methods. The proposed methods should be well-matched to the research questions.
- **Alignment with principles of equitable evaluation.** Applicants should demonstrate that they intend to implement approaches that reflect the principles of equitable evaluation whenever possible, including approaches to defining research questions and conducting research.
- **Qualifications of the proposed principal investigator and other key personnel.** While the principal investigator is not required to hold an advanced degree, the proposed principal investigator and other personnel should have the research experience necessary to conduct the study successfully. Nonprofit and government entities that do not have in-house research capacity are strongly encouraged to partner with qualified researchers who have established track records in the topical area and research methods proposed. Members of the team should demonstrate expertise regarding the policy area that is the focus of the proposed study and the proposed research methods. Collaborations among organizations or researchers are encouraged to enhance the overall qualifications of the proposed team that includes individuals with deep knowledge of the populations and programs under consideration.

We strongly encourage applications that include researchers who are from groups that are underrepresented in policy research and/or who are affiliated with institutions that serve underrepresented groups, such as historically black colleges and universities; academic institutions serving primarily Latino students such as the Hispanic Centers of Excellence; Tribal colleges; and other similar institutions. We also encourage applicants from diverse geographic areas and a range of disciplines that are relevant to policy research, including public administration; sociology; psychology; economics; community development; public health; education; social work; and others.

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- **Evidence of fiscal and project management capacity.** Applicant organizations and members of the proposed research team should demonstrate the capacity to monitor project budgets and time lines, manage fiscal resources, and meet funders' reporting requirements completely and on time.

EVALUATION AND MONITORING

Grantees are expected to meet RWJF requirements for the submission of narrative and financial reports, as well as periodic information needed for overall project performance monitoring and management. We may ask project directors to participate in periodic meetings and give progress reports on their grants. At the close of each grant, the lead agency is expected to provide a written report on the project and its findings suitable for wide dissemination.

APPLICANT SURVEY PROCESS

For selected programs, the project director of the proposal will be contacted after the submission deadline by SSRS, an independent research firm. The project director will be asked to complete a brief, online survey about the proposal process and applicant characteristics. This voluntary questionnaire will take no more than 15 minutes to complete. Responses provided to SSRS will not impact the funding decision for your proposal in any way.

SSRS will protect the confidentiality of your responses. RWJF will not receive any data that links your name with your survey responses.

USE OF GRANT FUNDS

Grant funds may be used for project staff salaries, consultant fees, data collection and analysis, meetings, supplies, project-related travel, and other direct project expenses, including a limited amount of equipment essential to the project. In keeping with RWJF policy, grant funds may *not* be used to subsidize individuals for the costs of their health care, to support clinical trials of unapproved drugs or devices, to construct or renovate facilities, for lobbying, for political activities, or as a substitute for funds currently being used to support similar activities.

HOW TO APPLY

Proposals for this solicitation must be submitted via the RWJF online system. Visit www.rwjf.org/cfp/EFPR2 and use the "Apply Online" link. If you have not already done so, you will be required to register at my.rwjf.org before you begin the proposal process.

There are two phases in the competitive proposal process:

Phase 1: Brief Proposals

Applicants must submit a brief proposal that describes the project and includes a preliminary budget. The proposal should be no longer than three pages, single-spaced, and use Arial, black type, 11-point font. *References will need to be uploaded as a separate PDF in the "Supporting Documents" section of the application.*

Brief proposals should address the following elements of the proposed project:

- The research questions the project will address, their relevance to the equity-focused policy research agenda, and how project findings could be applied to advance equity.
- The design of the proposed research project, including expected data sources; plans for collecting or acquiring data within the grant time frame; analysis methods; and potential for implementing principles of equitable evaluation.

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- Expected project time line.
- Qualifications, roles, and availability of key personnel (in full-time equivalents).
- Expected project management and quality assurance procedures to ensure research rigor and quality, timeliness, and appropriate fiscal management.
- Amount of funding requested and an indication of whether funds from RWJF would be the sole source of funding for the proposed project or used in combination with other funds or in-kind contributions.

Applicants may include resumes of key personnel as an upload to the application under the “CV” section in “Supporting Documents.”

Phase 2: Full Proposals

Selected Phase 1 applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal of no more than 10 single-spaced pages accompanied by a detailed budget and budget narrative. Full proposals should elaborate on the elements listed above and respond to any specific questions applicants receive about their projects based on their brief proposals.

Please direct inquiries to:

Gina R. Hijjawi, PhD, *senior program officer*
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
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Equity-Focused Policy Research project team
Mathematica Policy Research
Email: equityresearch@mathematica-mpr.com

All questions must be received by Friday June 28, 2019. FAQs will be posted on July 2, 2019.

All applicants should log in to the system and familiarize themselves with online submission requirements well before the final submission deadline. Staff may not be able to assist all applicants in the final 24 hours before the submission deadline.

RWJF does not provide individual critiques of proposals submitted.

PROGRAM DIRECTION

Responsible staff members at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation are:

- Gina R. Hijjawi, PhD, *senior program officer*
- Monica Hobbs Vinluan, JD, *senior program officer*
- Jennie Day-Burget, *communications officer*
- Jan Mihalow, *senior program financial analyst*

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KEY DATES AND DEADLINES

- **June 27, 2019 (2 p.m. to 3 p.m. ET)**
Optional applicant webinar. Registration is required [through this link](#).
- **July 25, 2019 (3 p.m. ET)**
Deadline for receipt of brief proposals.*
- **September 11, 2019**
Applicants notified if they have been invited to submit a full proposal.
- **October 10, 2019 (3 p.m. ET)**
Deadline for receipt of full proposals.*
- **November 15, 2019**
Notification of finalists.
- **January 15, 2020**
Start of grants.

*All proposals for this solicitation must be submitted via the RWJF online system. Visit www.rwjf.org/cfp/EFPR2 and use the “Apply Online” link. If you have not already done so, you will be required to register at my.rwjf.org before you begin the proposal process. All applicants should log in to the system and familiarize themselves with online proposal requirements well before the final submission deadline. Staff may not be able to assist all applicants in the final 24 hours before the submission deadline.

Late Submissions

RWJF will accept only those proposals that are completed/submitted at the time of the deadline. Because one of our Guiding Principles is to treat everyone with fairness and respect, RWJF’s deadline policy applies to all applicants. If an applicant experiences a problem with the online application system that may prevent them from submitting on time, please notify the program administrator immediately. To do so, click on the “Contact Us” link found in the “Resources” area on the left side of most screens within the online proposal site. We encourage you to submit your proposal in advance of the deadline so that any unforeseen difficulties, e.g., technical problems, may be addressed well before the deadline.

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ABOUT THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

For more than 45 years, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has worked to improve health and health care. We are working alongside others to build a national Culture of Health that provides everyone in America a fair and just opportunity for health and well-being. For more information, visit rwjf.org. Follow the Foundation on Twitter at www.rwjf.org/twitter or on Facebook at www.rwjf.org/facebook.

Sign up to receive email alerts on upcoming calls for proposals at www.rwjf.org/manage-your-subscriptions.html.

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