



Funding Opportunity for Development and Evaluation of Early Years Interventions

The Nuffield Foundation is calling for proposals that focus on the development and early evaluation of promising early years interventions that seek to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children, but that currently have a limited evidence base.

The call is part of a new strategic partnership between the Nuffield Foundation and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) that will deliver an end-to-end approach to building evidence in early years interventions, from development and early evaluation, through to large randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and scale-up of successful approaches.

A key goal of the development and early evaluation work funded by the Nuffield Foundation is to pave the way for large-scale RCTs of promising programmes, by developing the evidence to a sufficient level to make it a strong candidate for subsequent EEF funding.

This document sets out the rationale for the partnership, the key criteria for funding, the expected outcomes from funded projects, details of how to apply, and answers to some frequently asked questions.

1. Rationale

Gaps in outcomes begin to emerge between children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds as early as age three. The early years therefore represent a key stage for intervention to improve the learning of disadvantaged children.

In recent years the Nuffield Foundation has taken increasing interest in work relating to early years education and childcare. In 2015, we published *Early Years Education and Childcare: Lessons from Evidence and Future Priorities*, a report synthesising our relevant work up until that point, highlighting key insights from the findings of over 20 projects, and identifying a number of gaps and uncertainties in the evidence base. This report informed the development of a new funding programme *Early Years Education and Childcare* which has started to address this agenda.

Working with the EEF we are now seeking to accelerate the strand of this research agenda relating to intervention projects. While there is some high-quality evidence about 'what works' in the early years,¹ there is less strong evidence to indicate which specific interventions are most effective in improving children's learning and development. The Nuffield Foundation and EEF are both committed to addressing this research gap in order

¹ For example, the EEF's *Early Years Toolkit* highlights approaches underpinned by robust research.

that early years leaders and practitioners can be better served by well-evidenced programmes.

The Nuffield Foundation has expertise and a track record of developing promising projects at an early stage. The EEF has had considerable success in identifying projects with good initial evidence, testing them as randomised controlled trials (RCTs), and then scaling up the most effective.

In light of these complementary strengths, the Nuffield Foundation and EEF have formed a partnership that aims to support an end-to-end approach to building evidence in the early years. Specifically, the Nuffield Foundation is issuing a call for proposals that focus on the development and early evaluation of promising early years applications. The aim of any funded development and early evaluation work is to pave the way towards a large-scale RCT by developing the evidence to a sufficient level to make it a strong candidate for subsequent EEF funding.

2. Key criteria for development and early evaluation funding

To be considered for pre-trial development work, applicants should demonstrate they have:

- **An intervention or approach aimed at improving the learning – and learning outcomes – in the early years, particularly of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.** The application must describe the intervention in sufficient detail to explain the nature of the intervention, its intensity e.g. in terms of contact hours, duration, etc., and the target population.
- **A theoretical basis for why the approach is likely to have an impact based on research literature** The Nuffield Foundation seeks to promote evidence-based policy and practice. It is therefore important that interventions have a sound theoretical basis for anticipating an impact on specified children's outcomes.
- **A clear rationale for why it might be expected to be an improvement on existing interventions that tackle the same issue.** We are keen to generate high-quality evidence about what works in the early years, but we do not want to encourage an unnecessary proliferation of interventions. Applicants should demonstrate their awareness of other interventions that seek to tackle the same issue and explain why their intervention would be an improvement upon others already in use.
- **Identified the questions to be answered in pre-trial development work, how this work will be undertaken, and how it will contribute towards making the approach ready for future trial.** Please see section three for information about what a development and early evaluation project should seek to achieve.
- **Some prior experience delivering the approach in early years settings or schools, or a track record of developing and/or delivering other promising approaches.** Interventions will only be effective if they are acceptable to practitioners and feasible to implement. Applicants will need to demonstrate their experience of working in or with early years settings to show they understand the relevant issues, and that they have the necessary skills to successfully deliver the proposed project.

- **Evaluation expertise.** We expect all projects to have an evaluation component, and to consider how further development or scaling up might also be evaluated robustly and effectively. We encourage intervention designers and developers who do not have evaluation expertise to form partnerships with organisations that do.
- **Appetite and potential for the approach to be delivered at scale.** Since the ultimate aim is to promote interventions with strong evidence of effectiveness, it is important that applicants have aspirations for delivery at scale, or ideas for pathways for delivery at scale.
- **Commitment to future independent evaluation of their approach via an RCT.** Since RCTs constitute the most robust form of evaluation, and EEF specialise in funding RCTs of promising interventions, we would expect applicants to be committed to this approach.
- **An approach that could be delivered at a reasonable cost.** Since high costs are likely to constrain reach, value for money will be an important consideration.

3. Expected outcomes of a development and early evaluation project

In order to pave the way towards a large-scale RCT, a development and early evaluation project will need to refine the proposed intervention and provide formative findings that will help improve future delivery. It will also need to demonstrate that the intervention or approach meets the following conditions:

- **Feasibility**
 - *Is the approach acceptable to practitioners and/or pupils? Is the approach suitably resourced (including time)? Is the approach aimed at a suitable target population? Could schools / settings afford to buy the intervention? Has feasibility been demonstrated in an appropriate context i.e. one that is applicable to English schools?*
- **Evidence of promise**
 - *Is there evidence that this approach could impact on learning (i.e. is the approach underpinned by evidence, does the approach change participant behaviour as predicted in the theory of change, is it likely that the observed behaviours could lead to a change in attainment, has there been a measurable change in children's outcomes)?*
- **Readiness for trial**
 - *Is the intervention replicable (i.e. is there a clearly defined intervention)? Is the intervention scalable (i.e. could the intervention be delivered to a number of schools in its current form or is further development required)?*

We do not expect all applications to address all these questions comprehensively within one project. The appropriate scope for a project will depend upon the current stage of the intervention's development. For example, some interventions may have a strong theoretical basis for why the approach is likely to have an impact and to be an improvement upon

existing interventions, but may not have been implemented in practice or subjected to any form of evaluation. Where projects are at such an early stage we would expect an application to be small scale and to focus on feasibility and early piloting.

In contrast, some interventions may be more developed, with initial evidence of promise from previous evaluation of the approach (e.g. pre- and post-test assessments; a matched study; a trial conducted in another context). Where projects are at this later stage of development, applications should contain a strong evaluative component designed to ascertain whether the intervention generates a measurable change in children's outcomes. An evaluation component of this kind would need to:

- employ a robust design with an appropriate control group;
- use outcome measures that are valid, reliable and predictive of later outcomes; and
- be adequately powered (i.e. have sufficient scale to detect the expected effect of the intervention).

We therefore welcome small-scale RCTs within this call, since they will provide good evidence of the likely intervention effect and test the practicalities associated with implementing an RCT design.

Where projects are at this later stage of development, we would also expect the evaluation component to have independence built in as far as possible and to employ appropriate strategies to minimise the risk of bias. This might mean publishing a protocol in advance of conducting the project, involving an independent evaluator to measure outcomes, or ensuring that the individuals measuring and comparing outcomes between intervention and comparison groups are blind to the treatment condition.

Where development and early evaluation projects are able to demonstrate all of the features identified (i.e. feasibility, evidence of promise and readiness for trial), they will be well placed to seek EEF funding for an RCT to test efficacy – i.e. whether the intervention can work under ideal / developer-led conditions in a number of schools / settings (usually 20 or more). In these instances, the Foundation envisages that it would support projects to help them put forward a compelling application to EEF.

4. How to apply

To apply for funding as part of this call, please follow our *Outline Application* process as described in our *Guide for Applicants*, available to download from [the apply for funding section of our website](#).

The *Guide for Applicants* provides information on the application format, the issues we expect it to cover, and details of how to submit your application.

The deadline for submissions to this call is **Monday 4 September 2017**.

5. Frequently Asked Questions

Will all projects funded under this call qualify for EEF funding?

No. To be eligible for consideration for an RCT funded by the EEF, the intervention must be aimed at economically disadvantaged children aged 3-5 in England. However, early years projects outside these criteria are still eligible for funding from the Nuffield Foundation as part of this call.

What geographic areas are in scope of this call for proposals?

The geographical focus of the Nuffield Foundation is UK-wide. The Nuffield Foundation would therefore consider development and early evaluation projects that are delivered in England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland. However, they must have the potential to be rolled out beyond local or regional level. It should be noted that the EEF is focused on England only.

What age range do you consider to be within the early years?

We consider the early years to span from birth to five.

What does the Foundation mean by 'disadvantaged' children?

The Nuffield Foundation has an interest in disadvantage in the broadest sense and so would consider applications that focus on children from low income backgrounds, children with English as an Additional Language, children with special educational needs, looked after children, as well as other types of disadvantage. It should be noted that the EEF's primary interest is economic disadvantage, so while they would not disregard evidence of impact on other forms of disadvantage they would expect any follow-up application to be for interventions with a focus on children from low-income backgrounds.

What type of child outcomes should interventions target?

We are interested in interventions that target educational outcomes such as language, literacy and numeracy, but are also interested in social development, and other domain-general outcomes such as executive functioning and school readiness.

Will the Foundation fund the development of interventions from scratch?

In principle, yes. However, where applicants wish to design an intervention from scratch they will need to demonstrate an exceptionally strong theoretical justification for the proposed intervention (see section three), a theory of change, a clear articulation of how the intervention would be developed, and a compelling résumé that demonstrates the applicants' ability and skill in designing interventions.