

Mental Health, Earlier (MHE) ALACRITY Research Center

Pilot Project Awards Program

Request for Application (RFA)

FY26

Application Due Date: accepted until April 15, 2026

Prior approval to submit proposal from MHE Center leadership by March 15, 2026

Notification of selection by May 1, 2026

Award amounts: Range from approximately \$25,000 to \$75,000

Duration: 12 months

Anticipated funding start date: by June 1, 2026

Questions? Email us at mhecenter@northwestern.edu

MHE PILOT PROJECT AWARDS

OBJECTIVE

We are soliciting pilot grant proposals as part of the **Mental Health, Earlier (MHE) ALACRITY Research Center** (MPIs Laurie Wakschlag & J.D. Smith). This cross-institutional pediatric implementation science center is funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. Its core objectives are improving the identification and implementation of prevention of emergent mental health problems in pediatric primary care across the toddler and preschool periods. The innovative features of the MHE Center include (a) transdiagnostic risk identification (centering on dysregulated irritability in ecological context) linked to; (b) coordinated referrals to an evidence-based digital prevention program aimed at improving parenting skills and children's self-regulation; (c) novel training of pediatric clinicians on developmentally- and culturally-informed risk communication with diverse caregivers, strategies; (d) adjunctive interventions to motivate engagement in preventive services and community resources; (e) systematic examination of unintended consequences of implementation in pediatric learning health systems; and (f) a novel co-design process to ensure authentic and meaningful engagement of community partners. The anchoring institutional unit of the MHE Center is Northwestern University's Institute for Innovations in Developmental Sciences (DevSci). The center is co-led by University of Utah Department of Population Health Sciences. Pediatric partnerships include the Ann and Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital, Nemours Children's Health, and others. Collaborating scientists represent Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, University of Utah Eccles School of Medicine, University of Chicago, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Arizona State University, University of Oregon, University of Pennsylvania ,and San Diego State University.

Successful projects will broadly focus on improving identification, risk communication, evidence-based interventions, and implementation of interventions, tools, and strategies for the prevention of early childhood mental health problems. Strategies to enhance engagement and implementation of pediatric-based identification and prevention that target both patients (caregivers) and clinicians (e.g., pediatricians) are central. Areas of particular interest include (but are not limited to):

- Unique and common elements of clinical integration across varied health systems
- Impact of health system/regional variation on perception of and receptivity to mental health promotion in toddlers and young children
- Organizational and system strategies for implementation and sustainment of evidence-based early childhood mental health interventions
- Adaptation of evidence-based early childhood mental health interventions early childhood for hard-to-reach populations
- Development of asynchronous web-based video series about early mental health identification and family support programs
- Training and workforce development models, resources (e.g., videos, e-learning modules) for early mental health in pediatrics
- Novel digital approaches to increasing accessibility and interpretability of consents to improve participation and engagement

The goal of these projects is to advance scientific objectives of the Center in a manner that supports career development in early mental health research and implementation. Ideally, seed projects will be conceived of foundational work to support submission of extramural grants in this space. These projects will result in a community of new and established researchers poised to secure independent funding to significantly impact the burden of mental illness in childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood. Applications from Early-Stage Investigators (ESIs) are highly encouraged.

Projects will be 12 months in duration with total budgets up to \$75,000 in direct costs. We encourage applications of various sizes starting at around \$25K and anticipate funding two to three MHE Center Pilot Projects for FY26. Should a project's proposed budget fall outside of this range, please contact the MHE

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Center leadership (email below) for approval prior to submission. There is an expectation of engagement with some activities of the Center during the Seed Project year to ensure integration and optimize career development supports.

KEY TERMS FOR THIS RFP

Early Childhood: The center is focused on toddlerhood and will accept applications proposing pilot projects with toddlers and preschoolers (ages 18 months to 5 years).

Transdiagnostic: the risk, protective, and maintenance factors and processes implicated in mental health problems, whether they be biological, socioenvironmental, or psychological, show no specificity for particular diagnostic disorders but rather appear to operate across traditional nosological and diagnostic boundaries ([Buckholtz & Meyer-Lindenberg, 2012](#)).

Dysregulated irritability: In early childhood is conceptualized as low frustration tolerance and proneness to anger that is disproportionate to context and relatively unresponsive to support, most prominently temper tantrums ([Wakschlag et al., 2018](#)).

Ripple effects: The negative or positive effects of implementation that are unanticipated and unplanned, particularly those that affect differential healthcare access and implementation outcomes between different populations/groups.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR PILOT AWARDEES

Pilot grant awardees will be assigned a “Methods Mentor” to advise and assist on implementation research, statistical, and other methods applicable to the project. Awardees will also be invited to participate in MHE Center training, workforce development, scientific, and other offerings aligned with career development needs and interests. The MHE Center is committed to supporting awardees in submitting and securing funding from their pilot projects. As such, a plan for support of grant applications will be collaboratively developed between MHE Center scientists and the pilot awardee(s) prior to the end of the 12-month funding period.

HOW WE CAN HELP

Applicants must consult and work with the MHE Center leadership as they develop specific aims for this RFA. *MHE Center leadership must provide prior approval of all submissions. Applications received that did not receive prior approval to submit will not be considered for funding.*

The application process will involve a written application following NIH’s R03 application guidelines (e.g., PA-25-302 <https://grants.gov/search-results-detail/357805>) followed by finalists being invited to meet with MHE leadership for a brief interaction and discussion. Successful applications will be provided with a Center-based research team to include expertise on methods and content areas germane to the pilot.

ELIGIBILITY FOR THE AWARD

- Projects must demonstrate alignment with the MHE Center foci
- Early-Stage Investigators (ESI) are highly encouraged to apply, the MHE Center is focused on helping ESIs and will facilitate a collaboration with senior faculty who can help guide the project. ESI are identified per the definition provided by the NIH (see <https://grants.nih.gov/policy/early-stage/determining-status>). If you are an ESI who would like to apply but do not have a senior-faculty with whom you can collaborate, please contact Drs. Laurie Wakschlag and J.D. Smith to discuss partnering with a senior-faculty member from the MHE Center.
- Postdoctoral fellows and equivalent (clinical fellows) are eligible to apply but a well-established investigator serving as Sponsor and co-investigator of the pilot project is required.

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TERMS OF FUNDING

MHE pilot projects must be completed within the period specified on the proposed application, typically not to exceed 12 calendar months from award date. It is anticipated that funding will begin May 15, 2026 pending appropriate subcontract execution and other administrative requirements being in place. IRB protocol approvals must be in place before funds for human subjects or vertebrate animals research are released. **Awardees will be required to submit a two-page progress report at the halfway point (6 months) of their award period and to work with MHE Center leadership to address any concerns.** MHE Center MPIs retain the right to unilaterally cancel an award for noncompliance or under/nonperformance.

ALLOWABLE COSTS

The awards are to be used for research and team activities. The MHE center team will work with you during the application process on your budget items. Faculty salary support may be allowed conditional on approval by Center leadership during review process. Buyout of teaching responsibilities is allowed. Funding is available for salaries and fringe benefits of post-doctoral fellows, students, technicians, and other project personnel costs. Supplies and other related research non-personnel expenses are appropriate, with the exception of office furniture and equipment, including computers. Funds are not to be utilized for tuition or travel to conferences. Travel for research related purposes necessary to carry out the pilot project is allowed.

FULL PROPOSAL FORMAT AND APPLICATION COMPONENTS

Full applications will use the NIH R03 grant application format (up to 6-pages). Specific instructions on the format of the full application will be provided to those who are selected to submit a full application.

SELECTION OF AWARDEES

The MHE Center leadership will review full proposals and select the most meritorious for funding. Two to three reviewers will score each application. The NIH 9-point rating scale will be used to evaluate applications. In addition to the standard NIH review criteria of significance & innovation, and approach, review criteria will include candidates' track record or promise for success in research as well as alignment with the MHE Center research objectives. All projects will receive a written summary of the review, including reviewers' critiques. Scores will be presented at a meeting of the MHE Center Pilot Review Committee. Projects selected for funding will then be submitted to NIMH for programmatic review and approval.