The Early Childhood Innovation Prize

Prize Brief
Our Prize Topic

The first few years of a child’s life lay the foundation for future success.

This is a period of rapid development when more than a million new neural connections are formed every second. As young children are busy trying to understand who they are and how the world works, they are influenced by many factors, including relationships with parents and caregivers, experiences at home or in child care settings and influences of the community in which they grow up. It’s these earliest moments that matter most.

But too many young children are not reaching their full potential because existing approaches to early learning and development are not sufficiently addressing today’s challenges. Through the Early Childhood Innovation Prize our goal is to bring together innovators of all types, to collaboratively solve against the urgent question: how might we maximize every child’s potential during their first three years of life?

The future of children, the workforce and our economy depend on our ability to cultivate human potential during the earliest years. We need the best minds in the country working together to improve outcomes for young children 0-3, with solutions that have the ability to scale. We can’t afford to wait—more cutting-edge, breakthrough ideas are needed now.
The Need for a Different Kind of Solution

Too many young children are not reaching their full potential due to a myriad of barriers and limitations to existing approaches to early learning and development. How might we better reach children, parents and families, including those in need?

Quality of child care is low:

What if child care was affordable, reliable and high quality?
Most infants and toddlers spend part of their day with caregivers other than their parents. While much emphasis has been placed on preschool programs, infant and toddler education has received less attention, and families face a lack of high-quality care options for their very young children. Lack of quality, affordable, reliable child care is an issue that impacts all parents; new solutions are needed to ensure that young children are in optimal learning environments – formal or informal – during this period of prime brain development.
Parents need more support:

What if all parents received the support they needed during their children’s earliest years? Although technology has made information more accessible, parents are oftentimes overwhelmed by the weight of parenthood, especially in the first few years. Navigating resources, understanding how best to support a child’s early development, or deciding where to go for help when needed are common challenges not often addressed effectively. More support needs to be available for parents—especially those with limited resources—so they can be the best for their children.

Leveraging People and Places:

What if communities were child-centered? The effects of the physical environment are as significant for children’s development as psychosocial characteristics such as relationships with parents and peers. Positive outcomes can result from neighborhoods that are safe, walkable and offer access to playgrounds, parks and other opportunities. Whether it’s through urban design or in locations such as grocery stores, libraries and pediatrician offices, people and places may be more a part of the solution that we realize. Communities could see themselves as critical to harnessing the potential of young children and reaching families that need support.
Where do you fit in?

We need the **brainpower of thinkers from diverse backgrounds** who are willing to offer innovative ideas, lend mentorship and expertise, and invest capital to solve this problem together.

Do you represent a nonprofit organization, university program, company or product? Are you an entrepreneur or researcher yourself? Is your talent, whether as a product developer, financial analyst or technology specialist, new to the space? Are you a community organizer, big systems thinker, business consultant, or machine learning specialist? Do you add value to the solution in a way we’ve never heard of?

We can all be part of the solution. If you have an idea that could change early childhood and want to take it to the next level, **this Prize is for you.**
Our Evaluation Criteria + Innovation Targets

As stated, we are looking for submissions from a wide range of innovators. We believe everyone has the potential to be a changemaker on this issue.

We are seeking ideas that are novel to the space, or more effective, efficient or scalable than current ideas. They may be a new platform or service, a new form of delivery, technology-enabled solutions or much more.

Check out our Evaluation Criteria and Innovation Targets [here](#), for more information on requirements and submission guidelines.

The Prize Process

During the Early Childhood Innovation Prize, we’ll call a community to action – to share solutions that address urgent challenges influencing the first three years of life. These ideas should support children at their earliest ages, which will involve influencing parents, families, teachers, providers, communities and systems.

Participation in the Prize will give innovators access to collaboration with other participating innovators, OpenIDEO design resources, mentorship from thought leaders and experts in the early childhood space, as well as eligibility for Prize funding. Submitting by the Early Submission Deadline will give you access to feedback from a panel of expert mentors, amplifying the evolution of your concept before the final deadline.

To really solve complex challenges, we need the best people working together. Throughout the Prize, we encourage you to collaborate and leverage feedback – from peer participants, experts in the early childhood field, and the OpenIDEO team – to evolve and refine your idea. The open and transparent process of the Prize allows participants to gather and incorporate feedback and add additional partners or team members at multiple points throughout the Submission Phase, and before our final deadline.

After the Final Submission Deadline, GCI, OpenIDEO, and a panel of judges representing expertise in the early childhood field will evaluate submissions using the Prize Evaluation Criteria. Innovators may be asked to provide additional supporting materials. After review, we will announce the Top Ideas - a set of solutions that represent most promising innovations. Top Ideas will receive a funding award. In addition, a set of Promising Ideas will also receive recognition.
The Prize

Selected Top Ideas will receive:

• A share of up to $1 million in funding
• Recognition as one of the top early childhood innovations in the country
• Access to the right mentorship depending on your growth stage
• Engagement with an ecosystem of innovators, experts and investors
• An invitation to join an early childhood innovation network

In addition, a select group of Promising Ideas will receive:

Recognition as one of the most promising ideas in the country and an invitation to join the early childhood innovation network. Through this, Promising Ideas will continue to receive support via mentorship and opportunities to apply for funding.
About
Gary Community Investments

“Nobody makes it unless we make it together.”

— Sam Gary, founder, Gary Community Investments and The Piton Foundation

This prize is co-designed and funded by, Gary Community Investments (GCI), which includes The Piton Foundation. GCI invests in for-profit and philanthropic solutions for Colorado’s low-income children and their families. It focuses the majority of its resources on improving outcomes for young children, prenatal through five years old, while investing in two-generation strategies that support the families, communities and systems that foster young children’s development.

The Early Childhood Innovation Prize is part of GCI’s multi-million dollar commitment to catalyzing early childhood innovation. Although GCI is focused on young children, 0-5, the Prize targets ages 0-3 because of the significant need for new solutions in the earliest years. The Prize’s capital will build a pipeline and support the best ideas from around the country as part of its larger strategy to support innovation, and GCI looks forward to partnering with
others who have similar goals. Ultimately, GCI is focused on improving the school readiness of children in Colorado. Because of this, GCI expects its post-prize investments to support solutions that have the greatest potential for positively impacting the lives of Colorado’s young children.
What Happens After the Prize

The Early Childhood Innovation Prize is part of Gary Community Investments’ broader strategy for catalyzing the best solutions to existing challenges in early childhood. After the close of the Prize, a community of innovators will continue on through an early childhood innovation network, a joint initiative led by OpenIDEO and GCI to continue fostering collaboration, investment and impact in the sector. Learn more about the network [here](#).
Submit to the Prize

Good Luck!