Why do WePlay
Chicago Children's Museum (CCM) fulfills an important need in the Chicago community as a safe, inclusive gathering place for hands-on, inquiry-based learning through play. Play is how children learn about the world around them and how to use their language, touch, smell, hearing and bodies. It is how children learn cooperation and resilience. It provides the building blocks that help children be ready for life. For young parents, particularly those with history of abuse and neglect during their own childhood, positive play experiences can provide transformative opportunities. Engaging in facilitated, small-group play opportunities can allow young parents to develop new memories, and create positive play experiences for their children.

UCAN's Teen Parenting Service Network recognizes that parents and children in Chicago's under-resourced neighborhoods, particularly those who are in State care, face additional barriers that can limit their access to meaningful play and learning experiences. These barriers include the absence of or access to recreational areas in their communities and the lack of financial resources for families and schools to access opportunities elsewhere. Additionally, the reality and threat of violence is a constant factor in many young parents' lives, especially in economically challenged Chicago neighborhoods. Children in these demographics are most in need of—and have the most to gain from—early, supportive life experiences that enable them to develop positive identities, access new educational opportunities, and build social capital through strong relationships with peers and caring adults. Young parents want the very best for their children and these relationships, partnerships and experiences can open up a completely new world for them to explore with their children.

What is WePlay
The WePlay Pilot is a six-session, bi-weekly playgroup, for young parents (age 16 – 24) and children (under age 3), with current involvement in the child welfare system. The lead pilot partner is UCAN's Teen Parenting Service Network. A range of UCAN staff including case managers, education coaches, and family development specialists coordinate participant recruitment, transportation, and between session follow-up.

Chicago Children's Museum's Early Learning Team created flexible 2-hour sessions to explore a range of play ideas including block play, sensory play, dramatic play, and homemade musical instruments. These modes of play cover major areas of child development such as physical, cognitive, social, emotional. In keeping with the pilot nature, CCM's Early Learning Team and UCAN Supervisors debrief after each session and modify session structure, refine topics, and adjust facilitation methods based on parent and staff feedback.
True to the wrap-around nature of UCAN supports and CCM’s commitment to whole-child development, a number of additional supports are incorporated before/after the playgroup sessions. For example, CCM provides participants and staff with lunch and snacks, while incorporating guest speakers that reinforce UCAN priorities such as maternal health and child wellness, accessing high-quality childcare, and utilizing community-based early education resources. Similarly, as each session includes a story time, parents then take home 2 culturally-diverse, bilingual children’s books to build early literacy at home. Additionally, following each session, a free family pass is provided to UCAN staff to encourage between session visits with their clients. A trained photographer also documents each session, compiling an individual photobook for each participant, thereby providing long-lasting opportunities for parent-child reflection on the WePlay experience.

Who supports WePlay
The two primary partners in WePlay are Chicago Children’s Museum and UCAN. Chicago Children’s Museum improves children’s lives by creating a community where play and learning connect. CCM develops creative, interactive exhibits; a rich variety of child-centered, responsive educational programming; and innovative community engagement programs. Special care and attention is paid to the very youngest visitors and their families. The museum understands that a child’s first five years of life is a period of critical and extraordinary development. Similarly, positive play experiences and relationships in the earliest years matter to a child’s healthy growth and development. Additionally, caregivers of young children benefit from being a part of a supportive community and need access to high-quality resources related to play, child-development and parenting.

UCAN provides support services for the entire family focusing on healing, empowerment and education. They support youth in State care, community youth, teen parents, and low-income families. UCAN utilizes a positive youth development framework to organize services and support so that young people can develop to their full potential. Staff begin by meeting each youth where she/he is, identifying strengths and building from success. CCM and UCAN share commitments to youth and family engagement, community collaboration, and strengthening healthy relationships. These asset-based approaches are particularly crucial when supporting young parents coping with the effects of trauma stemming from abuse or neglect experienced in their families of origin.

WePlay has also received food donations from Bitsy’s Brainfood, discounted bulk books through First Book program, and complementary Ferris Wheel tickets from Navy Pier & Fifth Third Bank’s 100 Rides – 100 Nonprofit Partnerships program. Illinois Action for Children provided resources on accessing high-quality childcare and early education. Similarly, Pierce Pediatrics facilitated a lunch-and-learn discussion about child development, maternal health and wellness, and healthcare literacy. WePlay team is grateful for the ongoing encouragement of former New Jersey Historical Society’s Curator of Education, Claudia Ocello, who provided information and resources on the Partners in Learning program (1999-2002). Chicago Children’s Museum is submitting proposals for a larger-scale WePlay program for Fall 2017.

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