

History of PEERS

(Parenting Education Empathy Rapport and Support)

Mission Statement: PEERS Family Development Center works collaboratively with families and the community for the prevention and intervention of child abuse and neglect.

Vision Statement: Together, with community partners, PEERS will offer services to build healthy, nurtured, and empowered families.

PEERS is a program designed for Parents to offer **P**arents, **E**ducation, **E**mpathy, **R**apport and **S**upport. All services at PEERS are for the prevention and intervention of child abuse and neglect. “The anachronism PEERS evolved out of the basic concepts envisioned as essential to supporting families. It was the intent to aid both **parents** and preschoolers in an **educational** or re-educational format. Staff and volunteers would provide **empathy** for the situations encountered by the families. **Rapport** is a key element in establishing a sense of trust which is necessary to bring about corrective change. In addition, family assessments would point to other necessary avenues of **support** to help stabilize the home environment.

Quoting the first PEERS Handbook “In 1974, Congress passed the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, Public Law 93-247. This law officially stated that child abuse and neglect was now a matter of public concern and was no longer to be considered a family matter. It defined child abuse and neglect as the physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment, or maltreatment for the child’s welfare under circumstances which indicate that the child’s health or welfare is harmed or threatened thereby.” During this time, Jacksonville/Camp LeJeune area established a steering committee to investigate this problem. The committee was composed of representatives from both military and civilian persons. There were three individuals, Theresa Smith, MSW, Dr. Joe Chorley, and Dr. Mark Blockey, M.D., USN, who formed a committee to examine, evaluate, and suggest methods or practice which to utilize in effective measures on the local level. These services could be provided to local families who were experiencing child abuse and neglect. This committed found two areas of need to strengthen families through parenting education and to improve family life dynamics.

In 1976, Onslow County created a public awareness campaign which focused on these issues. As a result, the Midville Baptist Church of Jacksonville and local civic groups became interested in providing assistance.

On January 22, 1977, the Jacksonville Jaycees gave a check for \$2000 seed money to the Protective Services Unit of Onslow County Department of Social Services and the Children’s Services Section of the Onslow County Mental Health Center. The Jacksonville Jaycees believed in the reality and goals of which PEERS was based, helping families. This seed money was for the purpose of establishing a day treatment program for abused and neglected preschool children and their families.

Mrs. Sue Applewhite during this time was the Assistant Director of Onslow County Department of Social Services, located 3 to 1 matching funds for the initial contribution. It was due to this source of funding, the endeavor became an essential part of the Department of Social Services.

PEERS started with a part time director and the entire program depended upon volunteers. In June of 1977, Nancy Cowpewart was hired as the original Director to design and implement a pilot program for Onslow County. Nancy is known not only as the first director of PEERS but as the developer of PEERS. PEERS utilized the Midville Sunday School areas during the week to provide the services. Nancy designed a pilot program which consisted of parenting education with childcare during the day

for 8 to 10 weeks. The effects began with 6 mothers and 6 toddlers attending daily morning sessions. As the program expanded, PEERS needed more space and eventually through additional funding with United Way.

It is the goal of PEERS to help parents be the best they can be in their parenting role. In the beginning PEERS program began in the back of the Melville Primitive Baptist Church, then briefly at the First Christian Church of Jacksonville and was the only program of its kind in the state. Then it re-located two separate times onto New Bridge Street where PEERS rented a house for office space until the 80s when the non-profit purchased the Chaney Avenue house. Through the years, it has gained acceptance as a model program to help families under stress deal with the problems of parenting.

In the summer of 1980, a steering committee was formed to create an Advisory Board.

In 1983, the program was recognized by the North Carolina Preventative Services Training Institute as one of the most cost effective and comprehensive family service programs in the state. On January 16, 1986, PEERS was visited by Mrs. Dottie Martin, wife of then NC Governor Jim Martin. The Onslow County Child Abuse task force invited Mrs. Martin to tour PEERS program. Mrs. Martin was quoted stating, "What you have become in Onslow County really is a model." She stated, "the program is a great example of community involvement on the child abuse issues." The Governor's Award for Outstanding Volunteer Services was presented to the PEERS volunteers in 1987. Individual PEERS volunteers have received the Governor's Award and the JC Penney Golden Rule Awards for their service to the program.

In January of 1986, PEERS received its 501c3 non-profit status. Still working under the Department of Social Services umbrella. PEERS has an Advisory Board who has program oversight. The Director, who is funded through Onslow County writes grants, fundraises, supervises all program areas, assists in the running of each program and sits on several community boards and task force throughout Onslow County. Major funding comes from the United Way of Onslow County, the City of Jacksonville, Onslow County, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, and donations from individuals, churches, businesses, civic groups like the Jacksonville Jaycees and Kiwanis of Onslow County and fundraisers.

In 1992, the Department of Social Services completed and accepted a matching grant with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS), for the Adolescent Parenting Program. This program has been housed at PEERS since that time.

This program was developed by social workers and community volunteers around Onslow County who wanted to give services to families in Onslow County for the prevention and intervention of child abuse and neglect. When PEERS first began its concept was considered unique. Through the last 45 years of services to Onslow County, it is still as unique now as it was all those years ago. PEERS is still a guiding example of how a community can employ existing resources to maximize support systems for its citizens in a cost-effective way.

PEERS philosophy:

Parenting can be a rewarding and satisfying experience.

Through education, development of communication skills and ongoing support, family life can grow and mature.

Families have a desire to try and attain healthy goals in their family interactions.

PEERS offers **P**arenting **E**ducation **E**nhancement (**PEE**), **A**dolescent **P**arenting **P**rogram (**APP**) and **C**hildcare (**CC**) and volunteer opportunities. In 2018, PEERS became the backbone organization for a joint county/city task force called **TASCO**, **T**urning **A**dversity into **S**uccess for the **C**hildren in **O**nslow. PEE offers parent education classes aim to extend short term support and empathy to parents and couples who are in immediate need of assistance in their roles as parents. All classes aim to decrease stress for parents; books, and childcare. During non-Covid times, dinner is provided. Most classes are evidenced based. During COVID-19, PEERS introduced a Stress and Anger Management class which continues to stay full when it is offered. PEE now offers 16 curriculums which includes, *Early Childhood Nurturing*, *Triple P (Positive Parenting Program)*, *Active Parenting The First Five Years*, *Active Parenting*, *Active Parenting of Teens*, *Group Triple P (Positive Parenting Program)*, *Crossroads to Parenting and Divorce*, *Incredible Years*, *Love Notes*, *Darkness to Light*, *Making Children Mind without Losing Yours*, *Basic Baby Care*, *Stress and Anger Management*, and *Resilience Screenings* to educate any persons or agencies about Childhood Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences. In FY 21/22, PEE added *SARN – Substance Abuse Recovery Nurturing and Triple P, Positive Parenting Program Stepping Stones* for parents with children with disabilities.

APP provides adolescent parents with intensive family centered case management services aimed at preventing subsequent adolescent pregnancies, improving parenting and life skills, building confidence, keeping adolescence in school and preparing for employment. PEERS aim to prevent child abuse and neglect by equipping parents with the skills they need to raise happy and healthy children. APP utilizes the Parents as Teachers (PAT) Evidence-Based Home Visiting Model as well, PEERS serves as a Parents as Teachers Affiliate agency. Additionally, APP offers Basic Baby Care, Car Seat Safety, Shaken Baby Syndrome and Safe Sleep and B3 (Be Proud, Be Responsible, Be Protected) trainings to the APP teen parents.

The respite childcare program changed overtime as well. Childcare is now designed for parents who need temporary childcare due to appointments and/or respite care. PEERS also provides referrals to other services available in the Onslow County area upon request. Children 6 weeks to 5 years old is provided age appropriate, safe nurturing and learning environment to learn about social emotional skills. We have an infant and a toddler room. Childcare utilizes a Class Dojo app, this program engages all parents of the students in childcare to connect with PEERS and their child's teacher. This technology is allowing office staff and teachers to communicate with parents, share precious moments, showcase what students are learning.

In the spring of 2018, a group of professionals from The City of Jacksonville, Onslow County Government, Camp Lejeune and area community resources gathered together to answer two questions: How do we create a common language and system in our community to help decrease child abuse and neglect; and How do we develop a system for families to utilize for the prevention and intervention services to include parent education and family support services which are available in our community for all children and their families?" This was the beginning of TASCO, Turning Adversity into Success for Children in Onslow. The task force mission is to eliminate child abuse and neglect through community education, awareness, intervention and advocacy. In 2022, TASCO and the PEERS team will be introducing Community Cafe's with Resiliency Screenings to talk openly with adults about understanding the triangle of Childhood trauma, ACES, and Protective Factors.

Dr. Nadine Burke-Harris said, "The term Adverse Childhood Experiences or "ACEs" comes from the landmark study of the same name published by the CDC and Kaiser Permanente over two decades ago and specifically refers to the ten categories of stressful or traumatic events assessed in the study. These include physical, emotional or sexual abuse, physical or emotional neglect or "household

dysfunction” including parental incarceration, mental illness, substance dependence, parental separation or divorce, or intimate partner violence. A robust body of literature demonstrates that ACEs are highly prevalent, strongly associated with poor childhood and adult health, mental health, behavioral and social outcomes and demonstrate a pattern of high rates of intergenerational transmission. “

In FY 20/21, PEERS incorporated a new initiative derived from Hurricane Florence, PEERS outreach initiative. PEERS began with gently used pack n’ plays for safe sleep for families in shelters during the hurricane. Then began a joint fundraiser with Kiwanis of Onslow to raise funds with an annual virtual 5-k. PEERS had donated new car seats for car seat safety, families could have an appointment with a PEERS Certified Car Seat Tech. Then PEERS partnered with a local agency and we offer free formula to families in need. All these outreach services are in partnership with the Department of Social Services, Health Department and local hospitals.

Over the years, PEERS has gained and lost funding and positions, but still PEERS still stands strong supporting the community. Mrs. Sue Applewhite said it best, “Truly PEERS is a community effort, reflecting the recognition for, and commitment toward improving parenting skills.” PEERS continues to work towards breaking the cycle of child abuse and neglect through prevention and interventions services, teaching parenting education, providing a prevention based free respite childcare program, and community involvement. PEERS thanks Onslow County Government and DSS for being our pillar. PEERS Board of Directors has had exceptional board members through the years and give thanks as they have given of their time, talents, and treasures. PEERS staff thanks local partnering agencies and civic groups such as NCDHHS, DSS, United Way, City of Jacksonville, Jacksonville Jaycees, Kiwanis of Onslow and Modern Exterminating to name a few. PEERS flourishes with our connections to others in the community.

PEERS has several wonderful leaders throughout the years. PEERS staff, interns and volunteers continues the legacy of our founding mothers and fathers in providing the best services possible for the prevention and intervention of child abuse and neglect. PEERS staff continues to teach parenting social emotional learning of children and adults, teaching about communication, emotions, ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences), protective factors, and new parenting technique for parents to utilize.

As the current Executive Director, I have had the pleasure working with previous PEERS Directors, local partnering agencies, civic groups, volunteers, staff and interns. The PEERS story is a story of resilience. PEERS continues to thrive due to the people who come here, those that help to supply the services, and those impacted by the same services. PEERS is a non-profit with a giving-heart. Our logo the Tree of Live depicts PEERS as the roots are our past, we all learn from; the stem of the tree is PEERS standing tall each day, serving our community; and the branches are all the directions of services and community boards we serve on, our branches reach out in the community and wants to be there and be supportive. PEERS provides strength, knowledge, understanding and empathy with grace daily. I am honored to follow in the footsteps of some amazing PEERS directors. We will continue offering the services to each other learn, grow and thrive. Happy 45th Birthday PEERS.

Tondrea Davis Leach, MSW, LCSW
Executive Director