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**Date:** December 30, 2020

### **Darlington County Graduates Eleven Strengthening Families Participants**

**December 30, 2020-** On Saturday, December 19, 2020, Darlington County First Steps hosted an outdoor graduation ceremony for 11 families and 14 children who have successfully completed the evidence-based Strengthening Families Program (SFP).

The SFP in Darlington County was funded by the Children’s Trust of South Carolina, the state affiliate for Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina, KIDS COUNT and Safe Kids South Carolina. This program serves families with children ages 6 to 11 and is designed to:

- Help families develop positive discipline practices
- Stay resilient in tough times
- Reduce conflict
- Improve parenting skills
- Assist children with social skills, relationships, and school performance.

These factors play an important role in keeping families strong while protecting against potential abuse and/or neglect. Participants complete a 14-session program. Traditionally, sessions with families are hosted in physical locations, such as churches, schools, community centers, and other gathering venues. However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused families and SFP instructors to conduct a virtual program. Time constraints required the program be conducted in eight weeks versus fourteen weeks.

Leroy Gibson, SFP Coordinator, worked diligently to ensure each SFP instructor was equipped to provide a quality experience for children and families. Gibson led the charge with assistance from Data Specialist, Turksha Green, Parent Instructors: Shakiya Anderson, Amanda Martinez and Children Instructors: Holly Hutchinson and Sharon Wingate. SFP certified Instructors conducted virtual classes from their home locations in Dorchester, Berkeley and Darlington counties.

“I’ve watched these families meet as strangers and develop a supportive relationship which should remain after the program ends” stated Gibson. “Class nights were conducted twice weekly on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Parents and children looked forward to learning and engaging with each other from their various homes throughout the county. Learning virtually was also described as fun and exciting!”

COVID-19 restrictions and guidelines were enforced during the graduation ceremony. Pastor Chris Frasier, Mount Olive Word of Life Church, opened the celebration with invocation and a warm welcome was provided by Program Manager, Jessica Cohen, testimonials from parents, and closing remarks by Executive Director of Darlington County First Steps, Darnell Byrd McPherson.

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