It’s Valerie Gortmaker’s job to work with speech, occupational and physical therapists, as well as primary care physicians, nurses and social workers on a daily basis. As a school counselor and psychologist for Lincoln Public Schools, she serves children with developmental disabilities.

LENDing leadership

But it is her unique experience with Munroe-Meyer Institute’s Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) program that helps her successfully collaborate with these professionals.

Gortmaker is a graduate of the LEND program, which offers interdisciplinary training to graduate level trainees to prepare them for leadership roles in the provision of interdisciplinary health and related care, continuing education, technical assistance, research and consultation.

LEND emphasizes the development of leadership skills and a knowledge base that includes neurodevelopmental and related disabilities, family-centered and culturally competent care, community outreach and the translation of research to practice skills.

Funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration’s Maternal and Child Health Bureau, LEND programs are an integral part of national and international efforts to improve the health of infants, children and adolescents with, or at risk for, neurodevelopmental disabilities.

While a 2005-2007 trainee in the LEND program, Gortmaker worked as an intern and post-doctoral fellow in the MMI Department of Psychology where she provided behavioral therapy and consultation to children and families with a variety of behavioral, emotional, social and academic difficulties.

It was there that she learned the importance of communicating and collaborating with professionals from different disciplines.

“In the real world, you’re constantly working with professionals from other disciplines,” she said. “If I didn’t have the background I have, I would not work with them as well.”

In her current position with Lincoln Public Schools, Gortmaker determines students’ eligibility for special education services as well as their academic and behavioral programming. She frequently works with children who have chronic health care needs, physical and developmental disabilities and mental health disorders.
While enrolled in LEND, Gortmaker also collaborated with families. As part of her LEND project activities, she worked with parents to devise individualized interventions for their children.

She gained leadership experience by presenting her research and projects to professionals, which led her to give a series of presentations to parents of Lincoln Public School students about how to deal with children’s mental health issues including ADHD, anxiety and depression.

“LEND graduates are uniquely qualified to address the needs of children and adolescents with neurodevelopmental and related disabilities through clinical services, program development, policy administration, teaching and research, said Kellie Ellerbusch, MMI’s LEND training coordinator. “Across the national LEND network, graduates have accomplished much, including research findings that have been disseminated worldwide.”

LEND also provides continuing education and technical assistance to graduates as they move into the workforce and to professionals already practicing in the field to keep them up-to-date with the latest research and practice.

Currently there are 38 LEND programs nationwide, and while all programs have the same overall mission, each LEND has a unique focus and individual strengths.

Under the direction of Cindy Ellis, M.D., MMI’s LEND program was one of only 18 LEND programs to receive much needed additional funding this year under the Combating Autism Act. These funds will be used to develop specific, autism-related interdisciplinary training opportunities to address the critical shortage of appropriately trained personnel and services in the area of autism and related disabilities.