



# Saundra Barker

Chief Program Officer, Saint Louis Counseling

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Poverty, and all of its consequences, can rob a child of a childhood. Coping with crisis becomes a way of life and children must mature emotionally much faster than normal. According to Saundra Barker, Chief Program Officer for Saint Louis Counseling, “It sort of becomes who you are and either makes you more committed or want to give up.” Barker leads a team of therapists that, through a school partnership program, provide school-based counseling, consultation and prevention services in six Little Bit schools to empower students and school communities dealing with a norm most of us will never know.

“Our therapists are involved in crisis intervention with students daily, seeing some on a regular basis for individual counseling and others as needed,” says Barker. Therapists also participate in classroom presentations on topics such as bullying and conflict resolution, and regularly consult with school staff on responding to student trauma and grief. “You can’t say there’s a typical day for our kids – some truly go home to combat zones – but our role is to provide them the tools, the skills to process and manage their feelings of anger, depression, anxiety – and to be there for them.”

“They are strong and resilient without realizing it – they simply keep going day after day – and many of them have a will to help others,” says therapist Katie McDonough. “I try to build on this by helping them learn to empower themselves and others around them, find positive things in each day and build self-esteem to know they can achieve their dreams despite their trauma backgrounds and setbacks.” In the last school year, 72% of students who received individual counseling in Little Bit

sponsored schools showed improved functioning in the classroom.

Saint Louis Counseling’s School Partnership Program – utilized in 130 schools in total – is just one aspect of the organization’s programming, which provides professional counseling to anyone who needs help. But it’s an area that Barker understands well. Before joining Saint Louis Counseling (then Catholic Family Services) in 2004, Barker spent six years as a clinical social worker for the Washington County, MO School District, working with a student population from a poor, rural area that she refers to as “little Appalachia.”



“Sixty percent of our students participated in the free and reduced lunch program and 65% had special needs,” Barker says. “They faced a lot of the same challenges our urban population does, with the same tendency to want to run away from school and their problems. Our job was to help create an environment where students felt safe, could talk about their emotions and learn techniques to regulate them.”

She admits that what often hinders progress is the lack of involvement by parents and caregivers in

the process. “When working with kids, it’s all about the power of relationships,” she says, “and oftentimes our therapist is the most important person in that child’s life. It’s not the ideal, but the reality.”

Barker has been handling harsh realities since earning her Master’s in Social Work 35 years ago. Her experience has ranged from assisting people during natural disasters, providing grief counseling for families who have lost children to suicide or drug overdoses, to working to keep kids out of foster care. It’s a lot to witness, absorb and process on an ongoing basis and you have to protect your own mental health as much as you work to help others’, she explains.

What keeps her motivated? “My team,” she says. “They’re energetic, have innovative ideas and a desire to look at life through the lens of their clients to better understand the racial, gender and other issues at play. I also can’t talk enough about all of the organizations like Little Bit that are committed to meeting the basic needs of our most vulnerable, including their behavioral health, so that they can learn and dream like every other student.”