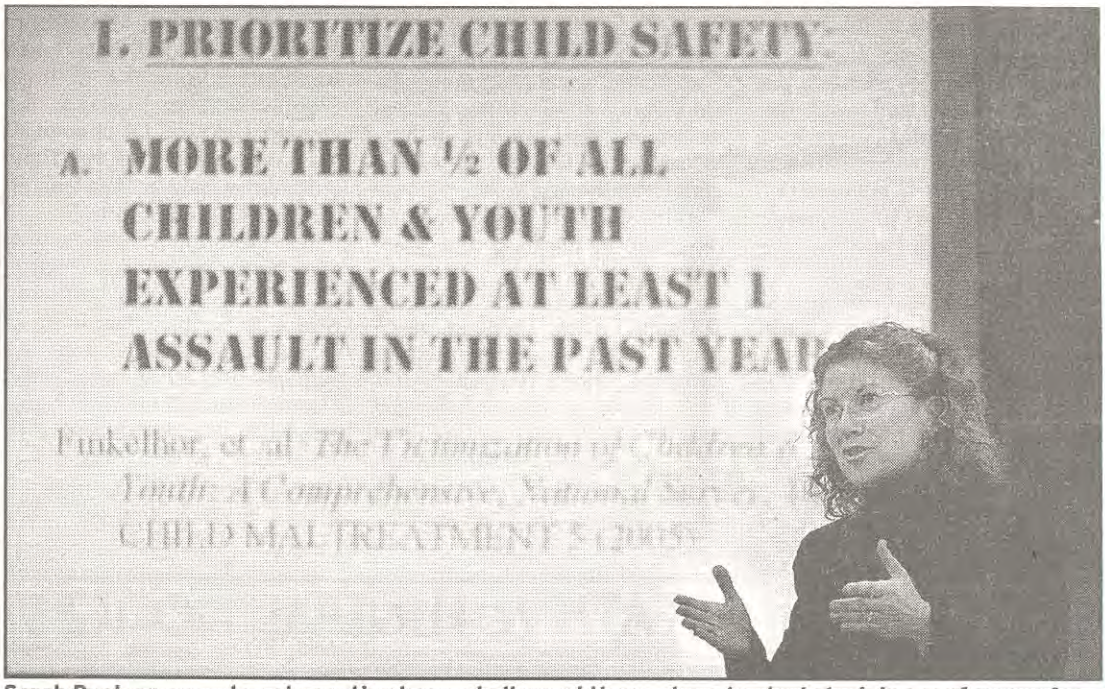

Sarah Buel, an expert on domestic abuse, challenged those at yesterday's training conference for county Probation Department employees to get involved with the children, victims and probationers they supervise. *Howard Lipin / Union-Tribune*

Probation, social workers urged to get involved, make a difference

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By Leslie Wolf Branscomb
STAFF WRITER

Sarah Buel, a Harvard-educated expert on domestic abuse, can talk for hours about family violence: the causes, the effects, where it starts, how to stop it.

That was her topic yesterday during a speech before some 900 county probation officers, social workers and law enforcement officers gathered for the county Probation Department's annual employee training event in Mission Valley.

But Buel went further than just talking about how to recognize a family affected by violence.

She challenged those in the audience to get involved with the children, victims and probationers they supervise. Find out about their hopes and dreams, she urged them. Take up a collection among co-workers for baby items. Pay their rent, pay for college, even organize a poker tournament to raise money for families on the brink of eviction.

Buel has done all those things. And she knows what it's like to be on the other side.

Buel told the audience that she's a reformed shoplifter and a one-time welfare cheater. She was a teenage mother, a battered wife with a gun to her head who ran away from her abuser.

Everyone, from a grandmother to her high school counselors, told her she would never amount to anything. So when Buel graduated with honors from Harvard Law School in 1990, she sent her transcript along with a note to her alma mater: "Don't judge children."

It was just the message her audience needed to hear.

"It was very inspirational," said Lisa Donohoo, a probation director who supervises domestic-violence and sex offenders. "It reminds me why I'm here."

Supervising probation Officer Jorge Gonzalez said: "She owned the whole story, and I think she owned the crowd because of her background. She was talking about survival."

Gonzalez said Buel's message was useful, too. "It's becoming a much more accepted idea that this issue of family violence is not a one-dimensional thing," he said. "We've got to start with the kids when they're young. We've got to look for the signs."

Buel said she left an abusive marriage in 1977, then worked full time and attended school at night for seven years to earn her bachelor's degree. She received a full scholarship to Harvard Law School, where she founded projects for battered women and women in prison and for children's rights.

She worked for six years as a prosecutor, and is now a professor at the University of Texas School of Law and an adjunct professor at Harvard Medical School.

However, before that, she was an angry teen in trouble with the authorities. Her turnaround started when one day, as she wore a pair of $200 leather shoes she had stolen, a police officer asked her what she wanted to do with her life.

Buel said she wanted to be a lawyer.

The cop told her: "You can't steal and be a lawyer."

"This was news to me!" Buel told the crowd.

The audience laughed, but she'd made her point — that a lot of the probationers, victims and children they work with don't know how to get out of the cycle of violence without intervention.

She encouraged the probation officers and social workers to ask children they work with if there's battering going on in their home, to do whatever is possible to keep teenagers from getting pregnant, to find out what families really need and get it for them.

Sometimes what they need is an education, or a job with benefits. Other times it's simply a refrigerator, eyeglasses or a bus pass.

"We have so many opportunities to intervene, to save people's lives," Buel said. "That's why many of us are in this business."