

Keeping Our Children Safe in Today's World

by Janet Maurer, Ph.D., Director of Counseling Services

[Stephen Treat, DMin, Council on Relationships - bio](#)

On Tuesday evening, February 4th, Dr. Stephen Treat spoke to a packed audience about teaching our children to be thinkers. How does this relate to keeping them safe? Dr. Treat explained that if we can help our children develop as independent thinkers then they will be less vulnerable to the influences of others because they will be thinking for themselves and thus less likely to follow others into risky situations. The more we talk with our children, not to or at them, the stronger our relationships will be. This dialog is the cornerstone of relationship building and the most important factor in developing the ability to think. Punishment, on the other hand, stifles thinking (although, of course, it may be necessary at times).

Along with this ability to think, we also learned that children need to develop a realistic self-concept, one in which strengths and weaknesses are integrated. As parents, we are role models for both admitting our flaws and celebrating our successes, and finding an acceptable balance between the two is a key to our healthy self-concepts as well.

One fascinating and controversial subject discussed by Dr. Treat concerns the creation of a secure sense of masculine/feminine identity. Research suggests that in order to help our children feel secure as boys or girls we should treat them in quite sex-stereotyped ways when they are very young. In the extreme, this means to embrace and even reinforce the rough and tumble activities of boys and the soft and sensitive nurturing of girls, for example. While this may fly in the face of political correctness and what we have assumed constitutes good parenting, the younger children are when they know that they are boys or girls, and the more obvious that is by their identification with these stereotypes, the more secure they will be. This then should increase their comfort with integrating both masculine and feminine qualities into their identities to achieve healthy androgeny.

Finally, Dr. Treat made several powerful suggestions about how to create ongoing dialog with children:

- Be mindful of your *assumptions* and *attributions* about your child. If you think negatively about your child then that may become a self fulfilling prophecy, so change your attribution.
- Pay attention to *positioning* so that you approach your child eye-to-eye. If you position yourself one-up, you lose your power and your child may respond to you with either resistance or tuning out.
- Make sure you represent *safety* to your child. Can your kids say anything to you?
- List 5 constructive and 5 destructive behaviors you engage in and *discuss* them with your child. It is never too late to work on this.
- Ask: How am I doing as a parent? Then, listen!