

Overcoming baby bombs

Guest: Kara Hoppe

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Alex Howard - [00:00:09]

Welcome, everyone to this interview where I'm really happy to be talking to Kara Hoppe.

Firstly, Kara, welcome and thank you for joining me.

Kara Hoppe

Thanks for having me. I'm excited to talk with you as well.

Alex Howard

Yeah, I was just saying to Kara before we start recording, putting together a relationship conference and not talking about this topic feels like it's sort of like the elephant in the room in a sense that's often one of the biggest, certainly in my experience being a father of three, one of the biggest challenges is finding the space and the holding for my wife's and my relationship, whilst also really trying to show up as the best parents we can.

So I think this is a really important conversation. Just to give people a bit of Kara's background. Kara Hoppe is a psychotherapist, teacher, feminist and mother. She spent more than a decade as an inclusive therapist working with individuals and couples towards healing and growing and towards becoming grounded, integrated people with better access to their own instincts, wisdom and creativity.

Kara also offers workshops for parents and expecting couples based on her book *Baby Bomb*, which we'll be, I'm sure, talking about a little bit as we go through this interview.

She lives with her husband and son in Pioneertown in California and sees clients in private practice via telehealth.

Kara, I got to ask you the first question, why did you write this book? And why has this become a key part of the work that you're doing?

Kara Hoppe

I love this question. It's such a quick, I wrote this book because this was the book my husband and I needed when we had our son, Jude, almost 5 years ago now. I am a couples therapist. I'd been a couple therapist at that point for close to 10 years. I felt solid as a clinician working with couples. And also I felt solid in my marriage with my husband. And we prepared as much as we could for our son, as much as anybody can prepare for that.

Alex Howard - [00:02:18]

One can think they're prepared, can't they?

Kara Hoppe

Right. Exactly. One can think that they're prepared, right.

Well, we thought we were prepared. And then it turns out, after we had our son, our whole relationship changed. And that was something I didn't see coming.

I remember one time, right when Jude had been born, he was only a couple of weeks old and we were learning how to breastfeed, to nurse. And it was hard. And I just kept trying to get Jude to latch, it wouldn't work and then I'd get him to latch, and then it did. And I just felt this relief and joy and like, oh my God, I think I can do this. I think I can be a mom.

And then immediately, after that I realized how thirsty I was and I tried to get up, but I couldn't. I was healing from the birth, and I had our son on me. So I had to ask my husband, Charlie, for help getting me water. And that may not sound like a really big thing, but at that moment, it was a dizzying vulnerability that I realized that I couldn't just be the independent woman that I had been. I needed his help in very vulnerable ways to help take care of me, help take care of our son, to do this together. It was like a leveling up in the intimacy and the teamwork of our relationship. I didn't anticipate, and I didn't anticipate how hard that was going to be for both of us to figure that out.

Alex Howard

It's funny, as you to talk, I remember when our first daughter was born and we were getting ready to leave the hospital. I remember thinking, I don't think they realized, but we don't know what to do. They're letting us take this living, completely dependent being on our own. We have no manual. We have no idea what to do. And it was just, it was one of the most terrifying experiences of my life that we suddenly find ourselves in this role. And, of course, we also have no manual for how do we navigate our relationship through this experience.

Kara Hoppe

Right. I know it's such an intense experience because neither partner really knows what they're doing. That learning curve with your first child is so steep. You're just like, is it a swaddle? Is it a diaper change? Is it hunger? What's going on? And you're trying to figure that out. And at that very moment, you could be being witnessed by your partner in that very flustered vulnerability of I don't know how to do this. And that can be challenging for people to be sensitive to their partner going through it and sensitive to themselves going through it.

So, yes, Alex, there wasn't a manual for how to raise a child because ultimately, we're all different. And there also isn't a manual to how to partner once you're parents that was accessible for me. Once Charlie and I, my husband, we were struggling, I went to the research. What is out there?

Alex Howard

Help!

Kara Hoppe

Totally. Drawing on everything I could find.

And the thing that most resonated with me was my friend and co-author, Stan Tatkin, he taught me about the idea of secure functioning relationships. And that idea concept is what really carried Charlie

and I through, and informs all the guiding principles of our book, *Baby Bomb: A Relationship Survival Guide for New Parents*, is this idea of secure functioning.

And what that is, is it's a shared power that both partners have over the relationship. It's both partners are equally responsible for the health and well being of the relationship. There's a responsibility to take care of yourself and take care of your partner, to be inclusive in your decision making together. It's this idea of you're stronger together than separate, and also that you, too, can create together whatever kind of relationship works for you guys right now.

And once you have, in couples you show up, all the safety and security needs are met. Like both partners know they have a sense of belonging with each other.

Then there's a lot of fluidity about everything else flowing from that. You think it's rigid or it could seem rigid to be like we take care of each other. But actually, by doing that, it really allows for a lot of authenticity, intimacy, and messiness, it's paradoxically caring for each other. You're caring for your partner, you're receiving care by both contributing to this relationship.

Alex Howard - [00:07:36]

And I really want to recommend Stan's interview as part of this conference. It's, don't tell anyone, but one of my favorite interviews in the conference.

This idea of secure functioning, that, as you're saying, is really at the heart of what makes a relationship work. One of the challenges can be that a couple can have that seemingly quite well figured out, and they've worked out how to be there with each other. But then this whole new demand arrives in the relationship. And beyond all the stuff that might get triggered on a personal level around one's own childhood, and that often can be challenging, but also just the physical demand of not always having enough sleep. And this completely dependent being can throw what seems like a well balanced dynamic completely off, right?

Kara Hoppe

Absolutely. That's why we called the book *Baby Bomb*, because that's exactly it, Alex. You can be prepared, but then going from a twosome to a threesome and both caring for the child or children, it invites a whole new, to find new ways to support each other, to support the relationship. It's going to have to be different than it was before. Same principles, but maybe redefined.

So we start in the book with that idea that the very first guiding principle in the book is Stan's idea of secure functioning, it's that the couple comes first. The couple relationship of the parents comes first, and we have that there and all the other nine guiding principles flow from that.

We want partners to learn how to take care of each other and be taken care of once they're parents now so then their kid can be a kid. Because what happens in systems when the parents aren't caring for each other and taking care of those emotional needs that only adults can do for themselves and for each other, kids immediately intuit that there's a problem in the system and they'll start filling in the gaps.

And so when we say we want to help parents learn what it means to put their relationship first and define that for each other and invest in that practice on a daily basis, it's really for the well being of the whole family.

Alex Howard

It reminds me of that analogy of if the plane is going down, you put your own mask on first.

Kara Hoppe - [00:10:16]

Yes. We have that in the book. Exactly. Yes. Exactly.

Parents, partners put the oxygen mask on each other first and then tend to your child. Your partner is upset from something that happened at work and you notice it because you're attuned, you have a choice, am I going to move towards my partner who seems upset? Or am I going to do something else? And we would advocate moving towards your partner because that's what you want them to do to you. That's the reciprocity back and forth.

Alex Howard

But one of the challenges that I think often comes up, and I think about my wife and I and our kids that, if one can get to the point where they're so physically and emotionally depleted and drained, particularly if it's a newborn baby or it's multiple children and all the complexities that go with that, but one can become increasingly drained and deficient in themselves that the idea of being, it's just like another thing to take care of. It's like how does one, in a sense, before one can even give that to another, one's also got to be giving it to themselves.

There's something about prioritizing self-care and prioritizing, really, because I think again, we can go into patterns of our love and our adoration and our care for our child that becomes the only thing that becomes one's focus.

Kara Hoppe

Right. And like you're saying, Alex, when that happens, it could be like a dropping of one caring for oneself as well as dropping caring for the partner or the partner relationship.

Alex Howard

That's right. It's almost like one has to have enough inner resource to be able to care for oneself, to care for one's relationship. And so, in a sense, putting the couple first, I guess what I'm really saying is, prioritizing one's own self-care as well.

Kara Hoppe

Absolutely. And like you were saying, too, Alex, when you have a baby in the mix that prioritizing one's self-care, there's going to be a committee meeting about that. Because especially if you're a breastfeeding mom, you're going to have to talk with your other partner or your other partner is going to have to talk with you about prioritizing getting that care.

And so that's where those principles of we agree to take care of each other can really be of support to the couple, because it can be called upon that principle, that agreement that you guys have, that can help say, we agreed that we would care for each other. I need your care in the form of you holding our baby, so I can just be with myself or nap or take a bath or a walk or call a friend.

But yeah, like you're saying, in parenthood, the caring of the self or the caring of the partner is a bit more complicated because there's the caring for a very vulnerable child or children simultaneously. So we really need, in the book we really had to focus on how to help partners in that teamwork with those committee meetings and have them be fast.

Because there isn't very much time. There aren't very much resources. And that's where the agreements can be so helpful. If there's an agreement that you and your partner make that we're in each other's care, then that can be called upon. Like if your partner says, I can't hold the baby, I'm doing this for work. We have an agreement. I need your care now.

And that way, when you're calling on the agreement you're not saying you're a bad partner or it's not getting in, it can also save time in terms of going into conflict because you're not attacking the person you're just calling to something you said you would do. And I said I would do, so now I'm asking you to do it.

Alex Howard - [00:14:14]

And what strikes me as you say that as well is the time it takes in that moment just to put it in an entirely rational way, is probably less than the time of having a big argument and having to mop up the argument afterwards.

Kara Hoppe

Right. And think of the argument how disruptive that is to both nervous systems, both parents. Now, the self-care needs to be doubled because now you're recovering from some kind of conflict with your partner.

So, yeah, it's very resourced saving or sustainable to put in the time to set up some agreements with your partner that work for both of you, that you guys can call each other back to, help each other with.

Alex Howard

What are some of the warning signs that people can look out for if they're slipping in the wrong direction with this?

Kara Hoppe

That's a great question. I mean, I guess if you're not feeling about your partnership, if you're concerned about your partnership, that's a warning sign.

And it's not a warning sign, like danger, danger, danger, you're heading towards divorce. It's like it's your psyche saying, I want something different. I want something better. I want to be part of something, creating something better. So if there's any consideration there, I say open up the door.

Of course, other signs are feeling lonely, feeling resentful, high conflict that's not without resolve where you're having the same fight again and again and again and spinning your wheels.

And no conflict. No conflict is something to watch for, too, because it's like if there is no conflict, I don't know how that happens, especially with all those committee meetings where there's no bumping up against, like conflicting needs. There's a lot going on when there's a new baby in the mix.

Alex Howard

I guess when there's no conflict it's probably because someone's checked out emotionally. They're not emotionally engaged in what's happening.

Kara Hoppe

Or they're afraid, they're afraid of giving voice to their needs. And I would say if that's happening, if there's a fear about saying, I need more care from you or I need you to be more present, that not saying it is not taking care of the relationship. I think that those are really important things to say.

Alex Howard

Yeah. One of the things that I also notice can happen, and I think my wife will be okay with me sharing this, that I remember a point in our relationship where I was saying I wanted more touch and more

physical intimacy. I don't necessarily mean sex, I just mean more touch. And she said I spend my entire day being pulled over by children and it gets to the evening and actually what I want is not to be touched in that way.

And I think sometimes some of these dynamics can be quite tricky. And I'd love to hear your reflections on that sense of just yeah, wanting one's space versus wanting connection in relationship.

Kara Hoppe - [00:17:32]

Right. Well, it sounds like your wife was understandably going through a period of feeling over touched, which happens a lot to primary parents. But the touch of the children is very specific to the needs of the children. And so while it can be fulfilling to hug and cuddle your children, and there is a co-regulatory experience that happens within that. But most of the work that primary parents do is helping the baby or the children regulate their nervous system. So it's really demanding.

And so a dynamic that happens with couples when one primary or a parent or a partner is experiencing that and then the partner comes in, of course, I want connection with you. I want to be with you. I want to hold you. And that could feel like, oh my God, another person with needs.

So I would say, during those times it's really important for that partner that's feeling overwhelmed with it, what needs does that person have besides isolation and no touch? But what other needs? More time alone? More downtime? After they put the children to bed, do they need 20 minutes in the bath or in the shower to just be with themselves and then engage with their partner? And how can their partner support them and meet them where they're at and go through that tender process together? That is so common. I mean, it's just so common.

And it's like this is really tender, awkward, intimate moments that couples have all the time, that many times when you're having it you think you're the only couple that it's happened to, and this means something about our relationship and it can feel really scary at the time.

And as somebody who's gone through similar experiences personally and then professionally, I help people with this every day. It's incredibly common and just staying engaged with each other and trying to find a way so everyone is cared for is the way through.

Alex Howard

What comes to mind as you're talking is the importance of courageous and open dialogue around these things.

Sometimes the fear of someone feeling rejected by what we say or the fear of saying it wrong. And yet, my observation is that the more that people are willing to say the things that feel difficult to say, often that there's a relief that comes from everyone somehow in that.

Kara Hoppe

Absolutely. I mean, that's intimacy.

And then also it's such a risk saying whatever it is that's going on, especially in an inclusive way, which by saying inclusive way, I'm saying it's not like, you you you it's like, I statements. And then also we, we want to be together. I know we want to have physical contact again. I know right now it is not what it once was, nor is it what it will be again. Right now we need to figure this out together. It's important to us, that language

So it's really, it's centering the couple, the relationship. And so that helps couples also get freed up to not focus on each other, trying to change each other, or fix each other, or make each other different. You can focus on the problem, which is a disconnect, physical disconnect that's happening for very real reasons that are legitimate and also temporary.

Alex Howard - [00:21:29]

I think that's an important word isn't it, temporary. Because I think sometimes what it can feel like is this dynamic has changed and it's always going to be this way. And I think that there's a gift when you get to your second or third child, you go okay, I do remember we went through this phase and it's a chapter in our lives. It's not the rest of our lives.

Kara Hoppe

Totally. But yes, with the first you're sowing the weeds, so this is life now, okay. But then you're right, when you get to your second or your third just that perspective of having lived through it and come out the other side.

I remember my sister told me, my sister and her husband have three children, like you, and my sister told me she was like, I finally learned with my third that after I give birth, I'm just gonna lose my mind for 6 months. And she was like, it comes back. But for about 6 months it's gone. And so she's like, finding that one, so when it was happening, I was like, oh, yeah, I've lost my mind but it will be back. And her husband, they would laugh about it. And finally, at that point it wasn't so dire. It feels dire when it's happening.

Alex Howard

Yeah. It's funny. What comes to my mind as you're speaking, there's a, obviously I'm sure you'll be aware, a big movement of moms on Instagram sharing their lives. And a group in the U.K. that got nicknamed by the media, the slummy mummies because they would post all these pictures of, it's 6 o'clock and like pouring a glass of wine, all the shadow side, let's say, of being a mother. Because they post pictures of their living room completely decimated by toys everywhere.

And the reason why I think, apart from the comedy and the wit often in how some of these posts were done, but I think part of the reason why it became such a movement for young moms, there was something that was so normalizing about the experience of, I'm not the only one whose house is completely a mess, who's losing their mind, that wants to kill my husband. That it's like there's something that's very relieving about being understood or being empathized with in that way.

Kara Hoppe

Absolutely. And I think that, going back to the point about the physical intimacy changing in parenthood, there just isn't very much of a dialogue about what happens in marriage after having a child or children. And so when partners are going through it there is like, I'm the only one or a shame piece. Like, wow, what's wrong that we're struggling, we feel so disconnected. And so there was an Instagram post with both partners just normalizing whatever happened in their relationship that I think would be helpful, too.

These conversations are really important for people to know they're not alone.

Alex Howard

Well, I think also you mentioned the point around physical intimacy. I think that's also a really important point as well, because without wanting to sound incredibly reductionist and cliché that there's some truth, perhaps, in the idea that women need to feel love to want to be sexually intimate, men need to be sexually intimate to feel loved.

And if suddenly sexual intimacy is not happening for a period of time, or happening much less, it's very easy to run all kinds of stories about that around my partner is not attracted to me anymore, or they don't love me anymore.

And you mentioned about your sister going, I'm going to lose my mind for 6 months. It was a shock to me when we had our first child, it was like, what's happened to my sex life? Is that gone forever? And the kind of realization that no, that's a chapter.

And then I think it could be very difficult for mothers reading stories of women saying the first thing I wanted to do when I got back from the hospital was have sex with my husband, because that's not what happens, I think, for most women. I'd love to hear you speak a little bit to how to navigate some of those, the difficulty of perhaps mismatched sexual desire that may happen after birth of children and the feelings that come up around that.

Kara Hoppe - [00:25:59]

Yeah. I'm glad that you mentioned it. It's so important. It's so huge. I mean, our sex lives as parents are decimated. There just isn't the spontaneity nor the time to really invest in romance.

And then there's also different libido changes. Hormonally, breastfeeding parents are shut off, their libido drops. And there's a biological reason for that, because the idea of us getting pregnant again and having a newborn would be bad for the newborn, if you're thinking about survival. And hormonally, when you're breastfeeding, you're going to be disconnected from your libido and that's for the survival of the species.

Alex Howard

I haven't heard that before, that's really interesting.

Kara Hoppe

Yeah. So I mean, it's not personal to either partner, it's literally about surviving.

But that's not to say that people that are breastfeeding don't want to also have sex. And that partners that, with partners that are breastfeeding don't also want to have sex, too. And so it's like finding ways to, like we talk about in the book, finding a new spring in your sexuality and redefining romance now that your parents. Romance could be like doing the laundry.

Alex Howard

I think my wife would like this one. Say more about this.

Kara Hoppe

It's the truth. I remember having a couple in front of me and working with them, and this was one of the things they were talking about, was their sex lives. And this happened to be a hetero couple. And she said, you want to romance me, do the grocery shopping, do the laundry, take some of the stuff off my plate for a few days. That will turn me on. And he was noted.

And that was a game changer for them, because she was really clear about what she needed, to have some space so she could connect with her own sexual self again.

Because when there's so much going on, it's hard to get that time to individuate and be with yourself for wanting your own vitality and pleasure. That's what sex is, it's vitality.

And in this couple, he heard her and respected that, and they also focused on the problem. The problem was their sex life. He didn't focus on, well, I don't want to do that for you because you shouldn't need that. And that wouldn't have gotten them anywhere but more conflict. Instead he said, okay, I will do that.

Alex Howard - [00:29:11]

And it becomes an act of love, doesn't it? It's like she said, this is what I need you to do. And he's like, I love you. I am willing to do that. And you can totally see how that would have been received as, not only a turn on, but also as feeling loved.

Kara Hoppe

Yeah. Yeah. That's like a redefining romance where you wouldn't think that that's like a turn on, but when you're in the throes of early parenthood that's really sexy.

Alex Howard

I see the meme on social media, romance is doing the laundry.

Kara Hoppe

Right.

Alex Howard

But there's something also that comes to mind as we're talking that, the courage to have difficult conversations, because I can imagine how both sides, taking that example, on both sides there's real courage that's going on there as well.

Kara Hoppe

I mean, it was really great. Both of them jumped into their relationship into the deep end, feet first. They were like, I want this to work. How are we going to make it work?

And that's the idea of going back to secure functioning where both people are respecting the choices they made in picking this other person. I picked my husband, he drives me insane sometimes, and that's real. I don't expect him not to. He's another being with his own life journey and his own stuff.

Alex Howard

And probably drives himself insane sometimes as well.

Kara Hoppe

Right. And I know I drive him insane sometimes because I'm my own person with my own annoyances, and I'm entitled to that. Those aren't things that we get into the weeds with, with each other. We just accept, yes, I love you. 80% of you is great, 20% is challenging, and that's okay, that's human beings. But the idea of secure functioning is like we picked each other and we practice picking each other on a day to day basis, so in crunching moments we can both call back to that choice. We're going to get through this together. How are we going to do this? Does that make sense?

Alex Howard

It really does. I'd love to build on that a bit more. I'd love you to perhaps speak a little bit to, because we're talking a lot about the challenges that really are there. And I think it's really important that we speak to those challenges.

But also, as I reflect, that having children has also been one of the greatest gifts in my relationship, because in a sense, I guess it doesn't mean one can't leave, of course, people do, but the idea of just bailing because a relationship gets difficult when there's three children that are going to be impacted by that, certainly raises the stakes a lot more.

And something around really being on the same team, having this kind of, it's a terrible thing to talk about raising children as being a project, but having this thing that has all these different elements and aspects that need to be managed that we do it together and we do as a team.

And there's something about that that's deeply satisfying as well. And I'd love to hear you talk about, there's the bomb that goes off, but there's also a lot of wonder that comes from that.

Kara Hoppe - [00:32:44]

Yeah. Even when you were talking about it, Alex, I could feel like in my own body, there is something so deep and meaningful about building something with Charlie that's bigger than us. It's like our family culture, and it's our child, and it helps with the existentialness of life, being fully invested in creating something that is completely unique to the two of us, that we are equally responsible for taking care of. And then offering that to our child and showing him this is how relationships can be. This is how people take care of each other. This is how people say they're sorry, you don't have to be perfect in this household. We all make mistakes. All of that.

And doing that for Charlie, for myself and for my son does have a really huge sense of meaning for me. And I felt it when you were talking about it, like a meaning, life meaning, value, purpose, even in the existential loneliness that also exists. It provides a cushion for that.

Alex Howard

Yeah. It also, we're having to flip back and forth a bit here, but it's also the place where our deepest wounds become exposed and the place where we're most likely to be triggered. Because we're so emotionally invested, it's also, in a sense, that makes it all the more challenging.

Kara Hoppe

It makes it all the more challenging and it makes it all the more rewarding when things work out.

And also in building something, with you and your wife, building something, you two, Charlie and I building something, and the couples I work with and anyone watching this, it's also a big leap of individuation and differentiation from whatever your first families are. Because you and your wife or me and Charlie, or people watching, partners can create what they want in this family, that it can be radically different than whatever family they grew up in.

And they feel like that's a really important piece because people come into partnership, and certainly into parenthood, being like, oh, this is how it was done in my family. I'm either going to want to do it that way or that didn't work for me and I want to go far the other way. Either way it's like a reaction to the first family. But there's a third way to do it, which would be an inclusive co-creation with your partner that you guys team up about.

Like, what kind of family values do we want? Like, what's important to us that we are doing for each other and then modeling for our child or children? And that would be informed by the first families but I like to think of the partners in this discerning vetting process together of deciding what's going to work for them.

And in that process, it's very intimate, obviously, between the partners and very team building. It also is prone for a lot of hurt feelings, and both happen. But it's also individuating from your first families and coming more and more yourself as you are. And partners can help each other do that.

Alex Howard

And I feel quite touched as you're speaking, as one of the things I also realize is the healing that can happen for us. Both my wife and I came from broken homes and, particularly on my side, quite a

traumatic childhood in certain ways. And there's something that's also deeply healing of being part of a family system, that of course, isn't perfect, but is much more functional and holding and solid. That in a sense, we don't have children to do our own healing, but there is a potential for our own healing to happen in that system.

Kara Hoppe - [00:36:42]

Absolutely. That's so cool. Isn't that great that you're creating something different?

I mean, I just think that's incredible. And I love helping people do that. I'm like you, Alex. I came from a broken home. The model that I had from my parents I did not want to repeat at all. And at the same time, but I didn't know what to do. And that's part of the reason why I started studying psychology 12 years ago was like, how do you do relationships? I really just didn't know. What I'd watched and what's on movies and stuff, nothing was really particularly helpful for me in terms of the partnership I intuited, I wanted. I just didn't know how to get there.

And then luckily I met Stan 10 years ago, and when he told me about this idea of secure functioning, it was the first time that I was like, oh, that makes sense. That's totally like, that is something I can practice every day. And it's not about being perfect. It's not about having a perfect partnership. They don't exist. It's about providing my husband with a sense of love and belonging that is not conditional on me being in a good mood. And him doing the same for me.

And that, to me, is gold. And we do that and so then, and our son watches us. And so I expect him to grow into the world, be a good citizen and know how to offer friendship and receive friendship and be discerning.

Alex Howard

That's beautiful. That's beautiful.

I'm mindful of time, Kara, but for people that want to find out more about you and your work, I really want to recommend your book, but say a bit more or so about what people can find, mention your website.

Kara Hoppe

Yeah, you can find me at karahoppe.com

I work with couples and individuals, and I also teach my book to expecting couples and parents. So if you're a parent in the throes of the baby bomb, collecting that debris, just email me. You can take one of my online workshops, and it can help you mend that partnership.

I'm on all the socials [@karahoppe](https://twitter.com/karahoppe) also.

Alex Howard

Fantastic.

You mentioned at the start that it was the book that you wanted to exist. It's also the book that I wish had existed, so thank you for writing it and thank you for this interview. I really enjoyed it, Kara, thank you so much.

Kara Hoppe

Thanks, Alex.