



## Conscious Life presents

### How to Not Traumatize Your Kids

**Guest: Amber Benziger**

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#### **[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow**

Hello and welcome to this conference. My name is Jaï Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. Today I am delighted to be welcoming back the wonderful Amber Benziger. Welcome, Amber.

#### **Amber Benziger**

Thank you. I'm so excited to be here.

#### **Jaï Bristow**

I'm so excited to have you back. You're a psychotherapist, anxiety coach, and the creator of the Anxiety Lab. Today I'm very excited about today's conversation. You know what? Let's dive right in and talk about the anxiety of being a parent.

#### **Amber Benziger**

Absolutely. Parenting is one of the hardest jobs out there, and one of the ones that we don't get a lot of credit for. There's a lot of books and advice, but everybody is so different, and was raised differently themselves, and then has their own way of how they want to parent, or be part of children's lives. It's not easy.

There's a lot of anxiety of, how do I not mess up this person, this little person, this innocent person that's trying to figure out the world? And somehow I have a responsibility in that. So how do I not do that? I mean, that comes with a lot of anxiety. So if you're feeling anxious about that, that is completely normal.

#### **Jaï Bristow**

Absolutely. I think also the culture changes so much about quote-unquote good parenting. What our parents were taught, versus what we're taught, versus what their parents were taught. Different generations have been taught sometimes very contradictory and opposing things about what it is to be a good parent.

**[00:01:54]**

Not everyone succeeds, but hopefully the majority of people who have kids want to do their best to not mess up their kids. Or maybe it's not even their own kids, I don't have kids myself, but I'm an unctie to a lot of kids. I'm at that age now where all my friends have kids and babies, and I love it.

But again, it's that thing of when I'm around these little beings, I don't want to mess them up. I don't want to be.... And I know how easy it is to do all this trauma healing work, I know how impressionable young children are, and how easy it is to say or do something that is going to have a very long-term impact.

So it makes sense that that's going to cause a lot of anxiety in adults to not traumatize their kids. It's such an interesting conversation because on this conference, and previous iterations of this conference, we're usually looking at the angle of, how to heal our own trauma, how to heal our inner child, but today we're talking about how to anticipate that trauma in the next generation. So I think it's a very juicy topic.

### **Amber Benziger**

I'm so excited because I feel like you're right, we get stuck in, what can I do? What can I do? And we don't talk about, why is this coming up for me? And I think this topic will expand upon that.

For a lot of us, we do have trauma, we do have past experiences that we're fearful of. And we're constantly working on healing ourselves, which is so important, but looking at how we are managing during that process? And how is that process affecting the other people around us? Specifically younger people in our lives.

### **Jaï Bristow**

Exactly. My first question, or second question, I don't know which question I'm on. Is it possible to not mess up kids in our lives? Is it possible to be a perfect parent, or a perfect uncle, auntie, unctie? Is it possible to not cause any harm or trauma entirely do you think?

### **Amber Benziger**

I think there is no such thing as perfect. I feel like when we put that expectation on ourselves that causes a lot of anxiety and stress in itself, and can make us react in ways that we don't want to because of the pressure. So starting from that baseline, take that expectation off yourself, because that already gets you stuck in, what is perfect?

Are there kids that grow up without trauma? 100%. We also have to remember perception, and from one person to another. So two kids can grow up in the same household with the same parents. They become adults, they're having a conversation and their experience is completely different. Where mom was ignoring me. What are you talking about? You were the favorite. I felt abandoned. And the other sibling is like, what? I thought that about you.

So we also have to remember that, of how they're experiencing us, how they're experiencing the world around us. Because it's not just you, as the parent that they're interacting with, it's school, it's friends, it's other people's parents, it's sports, whatever that is. So the perception is going to be different.

**[00:05:24]**

We can do our best and think we are giving the most communicative, healthy relationship, but there could be something else in that child's life that could have shown them differently. We have to remember that too.

### **Jaï Bristow**

I really appreciate how you're bringing in different siblings won't have the same experience of their parents. I think it's, if I remember correctly, Gabor Maté, who said something like, no two kids have the same parents. And it's so true, because again, as adults, as human beings, we're constantly evolving and changing. Even twins have their own person, and their own relationship with their parents.

But especially when there's an age gap, there's been time for the parents to change and evolve. I have a younger brother, for example, and we've definitely had that conversation you were pointing towards, of talking about our childhoods and then realizing we had very... There were some things where we could definitely agree on, but there were a lot where we had very different experiences of both our parents, but our perception of how the other was treated, versus how we were treated.

It's really important to remember, as you say, that there are different perceptions, there are different ways, and to remember that kids are humans, too. I know this might sound obvious, but sometimes people can dehumanize kids.

And yes, they're young beings with a lot less life experience than adults, perhaps, but they're still human beings with their own personality, their own lived experiences, their own preferences, their own desires, their own wishes and stuff. And no two humans are the same. And that's true for kids as well.

And parents are changing. And as you said, there is no such thing as perfect. I think that that's important to remember. And then, within that, there is very much different parenting styles. And depending how much work someone has even done on themselves, will impact how good, or how much trauma is likely to be passed down. That's something that I've spoken about with previous speakers on this event, is ancestral trauma, and what we inherit and breaking those cycles and that kind of thing.

### **Amber Benziger**

And really being aware for yourself of we can go into it thinking we're going to adopt this parenting style, we're going to be this type of parent, but when we get there, it's different.

And thinking about different times in your life as a kid, when your kid reaches that time period, personally, for me, I have two kids, and when my daughter reached a certain age, there was a lot of trauma in my life at that time. So it became really... I could start seeing myself show up different, or feel different in the way I was parenting her, out of fear from things that had occurred for me.

So it was like, okay, I need to take a step back and have the insight. I think it's just really being personally aware for yourself and reminding yourself that as they age, and as different things come

up, things will change. So being open to adapt to that, not being like, oh, I failed. But just taking that step back and realizing that maybe I need to tweak or change something for myself and them.

### **[00:08:47] Jaï Bristow**

100%. And I love how you bring in that piece of the theoretical versus the practical, like how we imagine ourselves to be parents, or the ideas, or the hopes, or the wishes of how we are, versus how we actually end up being. And again, we have to remember, parents are often tired.

It's a lot of responsibility, and it's quite exhausting being a parent, which means that when you're tired, and underslept, and stressed, all of that kind of thing will impact how you are with any human, and shorten the fuse and all that kind of stuff.

I'm curious, you touched upon this already when you were talking about your own experience with your daughter, and how you were projecting some of your own stuff, based on what you'd lived at that age. But how do we avoid passing down trauma as much as possible? Again, this is not about perfection, as you've already said, but how do we try and end the trauma cycle, and not pass down our own fears, our own traumas, our own difficult experiences to either our own kids, or the kids in our lives.

### **Amber Benziger**

Yeah, I think we need to ask ourselves a few questions. What are we modeling? Because we could be saying that we're doing this type of parenting style, but when we're frustrated about something that doesn't even have to do with our kids, kids are always watching. So how are we interacting with the people around us in the world? How are we showing up? And having our own emotional regulation. What are we modeling to our kids? Being more insightful about that.

Also reminding yourself, and your child, that you are human and they are human, and that you're going to make mistakes, you're going to mess up. You're going to come out of that style that you're trying to do. Maybe you're yelling, and that's something that you don't want to do. So reminding yourself, and your child, that you're human and taking accountability for the times that you do mess up. And then allowing them to have that conversation with you, and you to have that conversation with them, to humanize the experience for both of you.

I think for a lot of us growing up, we didn't necessarily have that, so it can be a little strange to see kids. Like you said, kids are still people too, they still have their own experiences, they still have their own thoughts, feelings. And although sometimes we can be like, that's not true, well, that's their perception, so we can't just push that to the side.

So really being open to hear and understand where they're coming from, it doesn't mean you have to be like, yes, you're right, but at least give them the space and the platform to say how they're feeling without judgment. I think that's one of the bigger things that we can do.

So really being careful about what we're mirroring and being insightful with ourselves, taking accountability, and then giving the space to have that conversation, and repairing and taking accountability when we mess up.

### **[00:11:47] Jaï Bristow**

I really love that, I think they're excellent tools and things to remember. Modeling is so important always, and then that accountability, and that humanness, is all really important.

I'm thinking about how when we're with kids, we don't want to project our own traumas onto them. But I think there's also something about being with kids sometimes can heal, to some degree, our own inner child. Because if we remember that sometimes, I think about, I feel into my own traumas, or my own inner child, I get into contact with, how would I speak to a four year old that I know who was feeling the things that I'm currently feeling?

I think sometimes being around actual kids can possibly help us reparent ourselves and heal some of our trauma. This is a new thought that's coming in, so I want to check that out with you, and see what your thoughts are on that.

### **Amber Benziger**

Yeah, absolutely. I think we forget how to play, and be youthful, and get in touch with that part of ourselves. It also helps us to remember, what did I need at that age? And can we give that to ourselves? Maybe not in that specific way, but allow ourselves time to play, or allow ourselves times to mess up, or allow ourselves more compassion when we are feeling drained, or when we do mess up, or opt out per se. We can get in touch with that, so not only is that helping us with our inner child, but it's also helping us to understand the children in our lives.

### **Jaï Bristow**

Absolutely. I think that there's something you're touching upon which is really important, which is the mutual learning. I think as parents or as adults, we're very much the responsible ones for the kids. There is a lot we can teach our kids, and kids are sponges. So we have to be really aware of what we're modeling, and how we're behaving when we're around kids, because it's not just what we're saying, it's also what we're doing, and you've talked a bit about that already.

But also how much we can learn from kids, how we can connect to that playfulness, that innocence, that curiosity, and how with also our wisdom of what we have learned and our maturity. But bringing in those qualities is a really beautiful and healing experience.

I'm really appreciating this conversation and how it's not just about how do we not mess up our kids, or the kids in our lives. But also how can we learn from kids, and how can we not mess up our inner child, or other people's inner child as well, adults and stuff. I think that was a slight tangent, but coming back to the conversation and the fact that there is no such thing as perfect.

There is no such thing as a perfect parent, and you talked about humanness, and the messing up, and the accountability, that's so important. So how do we forgive ourselves for any harm that we have caused? And again, I think that this question is not just directed at parents, but at anyone who's caused harm, who's caused some trauma, which can happen. How do we navigate that? How do we forgive ourselves in those moments?

### **[00:15:19] Amber Benziger**

Yeah. That's where we start with self-compassion. It's not only just being kind towards yourself, and understanding, instead of being critical, like, why did I do that? I'm so terrible. Starting to be kind, what would you say to somebody else if they had made that mistake? How would you talk to them?

And then seeing that you're human, so you are going to mess up. So having that understanding, instead of isolating yourself that you have to be perfect, and categorizing every experience as a failure or a success. There's a lot of messy gray and being open to that.

And then just being mindful and becoming more aware. So learning from that, okay, I didn't like when I did this, I felt like this when that happened, so what could I do instead? And building more mindful habits off of that.

And that's going to help you, in turn, learn to be more compassionate with yourself. You're going to be more forgiving and understanding with yourself while also taking accountability, reminding yourself that you're human. You inevitably are going to mess up at some point in time. And that's okay because we're going to learn from it. We're going to take that, we're going to remember how we felt, and we're going to apply it to do hopefully better next time.

### **Jai Bristow**

Absolutely, I really appreciate the parallels there are between forgiving ourselves, and not passing down trauma. There's a lot of the same tools that you've given in answer to both those questions.

I think that it's really beautiful what you were saying about self-compassion, and the mindfulness habits, and the accountability. And yet, when we've caused harm, whether it's towards our kids, whether it's towards another being, towards a partner, an ex, maybe even towards our parents, those feelings that can arise initially are often shame and guilt.

And those are two very heavy, paralyzing, uncomfortable feelings. So how do we navigate those feelings? And how do we heal or free ourselves from those feelings, in order to apply some of what you were saying, how do we? Because it can be hard to have self-compassion when we're really in the shame and the guilt feelings.

### **Amber Benziger**

Yeah, shame specifically. Say, you said something that you didn't like to say, you feel guilty that I said that, and that was bad, quote-unquote. But shame is that I'm bad, and we take that on, and we take on the things that we've experienced, or the behaviors, and we say that that is us, and that's not necessarily you.

So being able to separate the two, is really helpful in shame and guilt. When you're feeling bogged down about that instead of, I'm a bad person, okay, I did something that wasn't good, or that I didn't like, or that was harmful. So being able to separate those behaviors from who you actually are as a person, reminding yourself of that human aspect again.

And then, what do I have control over now that I made this mistake? A lot of times we get caught in the thing that we did, and we can't see past that. But unfortunately, there has to be that level of

self-acceptance of this happened. We don't have to like it, we don't have to be proud of it, but it happened, we can't go back, we don't have the time machine. We can't change it. So what can I do?

**[00:18:52]**

What do I have control over to moving forward? So back to taking accountability, does this person want to communicate and talk with me? Do I have to respect their boundaries and learn from that, and know that, okay, I don't have control over that other person. I think that can really be difficult when we're in these traumatic experiences and we're feeling that shame or guilt.

A lot of times we're really looking for that other person to tell us that it was okay, and sometimes we won't get that. So taking what we can from that, and learning so we can do better moving forward, and it's so much easier said than done. That is a process that we can do with that self-healing, and that self-forgiveness, and meeting that other person where they're at.

### **Jai Bristow**

Absolutely, I really appreciate that questioning of that forgiving, but then also that question of, what do we have control over? We can't rewrite history. So getting caught up in that anxiety of just going over the situation again and again in our heads isn't going to heal. It's not going to help the other person, it's not going to help you.

So I think in terms of what we have control over, there's two really important elements. Which one is that, like you said, respecting boundaries and that thing, and accountability. I think one is very much what can we learn from this situation so that we don't repeat it with other people. So that it's not a continual pattern.

But the other one is how do we repair? Respecting boundaries, and all of that, is definitely one important element. But if we've caused harm, I don't think it's ever too late to repair. And not repairing just so that you feel better, or so that you're being performative in your apologies, but repairing. And not necessarily repairing to have a relationship again, if there's been a rupture, or to get back to how it was before, for example.

But there's something about repair. And quick story time, one of my friends had an ex-partner who hadn't been good to her at all. And years and years later, that ex-partner wrote to her being like, hey, I've been growing a lot, and reflecting on the past, and I realized the way I treated you was not okay, and I'm genuinely sorry. And this ex-partner now had a new partner and was engaged. So it wasn't to reconnect. It was so healing for my friend to receive that message and hear that. And this was literally almost a decade later.

So I'm wondering if you can say more about these two elements of repairing once we've caused harm, and also what we were saying about that learning in order to not perpetuate, and so stepping away from the anxiety, and instead going into learning and repairing.

### **Amber Benziger**

I think you hit the nail on the head when you were saying you don't want to do it in a performative way. It's really being intentional about your repairing, ask yourself, why do I want to do this? Because it's really not for, technically the other person, because they may not be in a place to

receive it, or willing to. So it's really like, I'm doing this because I need to say this, I'm ready to say this, this means something to me, this person meant something to me, and I care about them, and I want to say these words.

### **[00:22:36]**

So making sure it's coming from a genuine place because it can be felt and seen when it's not, being honest with yourself about that. So making sure that you're ready to be intentional, and it's not just like, oh, I need this person to forgive me, because that might not happen. Having the right intentions in place, and then staying within your own boundaries, and their own boundaries for their safety.

Sending a letter because maybe that person is not ready to see you face to face, or take your phone call. What is actually something that you're able to do, and in control of, and that won't cause more harm, that's something to think about as well.

Then just being genuine, and honest, and open, and when you're being intentional about that repair, making sure that you're doing it with yourself, too. Having that time for self-forgiveness and compassion. It's not just words that you're speaking to the other person, but also for you, so that you can have that acceptance to continue to move forward in whatever way that looks.

### **Jai Bristow**

Absolutely. I think there's such important points you've made there, and in not causing more harm with that person, yes, but then also, how do we take that forward in our lives to not repeat that pattern?

And to learn from the experience so that instead of just it being that horrible thing that we obsess over, and get really anxious about, and feel really guilty about, and shame spiral about, that we can use it as an opportunity to learn, and grow, and evolve, and almost a turning point, a thing of, okay, this thing happened, and I did this thing and it was bad, but this is what I've learned from it, and this is how I don't repeat this pattern.

### **Amber Benziger**

Yeah, I think that's true. I think that's one of the biggest things to take away, especially in these situations of, okay, what I have control over is what I do next. So how am I going to move forward? How am I going to allow this to impact me to do better, or show up differently, for myself and the people in my life?

I think that's not something that we always are constantly thinking about, so it's something to remember. Maybe it's a good thing to journal about, or to keep in mind, or to write down somewhere, because I think we aren't reflecting on that. A lot of times we are sitting in our negativity, and sitting in the trauma, instead of processing and moving through it.

I think that gives us a space and a push to continue to move through it. And not in that toxic way of like, oh, I needed this to happen, this terrible, horrible thing to happen, to be this person. Because that's some bullshit. But in the way of, what can I control? And how do I want to show up best for myself and the people in my life?



### **[00:25:23] Jaï Bristow**

I'm really glad you differentiated between that, what you're calling toxic bullshit, which I like, versus that kind of, I'm so glad this traumatic thing happened, or that I did this bad thing, or this bad thing happened to me because I grew from it.

But instead of the reality of this happened, whether it's something that happened to me, or something I did to someone else, this event has taken place. And we don't, haven't invented time travel yet, as far as I'm aware, so I can't just go back and undo it. So instead, how can I grow from it in both cases? Whether we're the ones who have been traumatized, or whether we're the ones causing harm and trauma.

You mentioned journaling and a couple of other things, and on the last trauma conference we talked about trauma and anxiety. Anxiety is very much your area of expertise and speciality, I really recommend people check out that interview because I think it was a really important one.

Journaling is a tool that I also interviewed you about, which you really find supportive and helpful in the healing process. I'm wondering if you want to say a bit more about journaling, especially because I know that you have, as part of the Anxiety Lab that you created, you also have a new card deck with journaling prompts. I wonder if you want to say a bit about all of that?

### **Amber Benziger**

I think that journaling is such a special way to connect and help you become more insightful. Especially when you don't always have the tools, or therapy isn't something that you have access to at that time.

Or maybe you don't feel like you don't have a support that's understanding that you can talk to in your everyday life. Having that journal, on that page can be a great place to explore those feelings. How am I feeling? What do I have control over? How can I move through this? Where is this shame and guilt coming from? What are the feelings that are coming up for me? And that's why I created the card deck.

I have been journaling since I was little, and I think it's a great place for you to put your feelings. I also think when we have these journals that we buy, they're pretty and we don't want to mess them up, so a lot of people don't use these journals that we get with these prompts. The card deck is a great way because you can either just pick randomly, go through them, and then you can use whatever paper. You can use your phone, you can use video journaling, where you're just talking into your camera.

You can take them anywhere, there're just a pack of cards, and you can throw them in your bag. It's been really cool to see people use them, and how helpful it's been, and asking really thought provoking questions that maybe we wouldn't think about, especially in those moments of high anxiety.

### **Jaï Bristow**

Fantastic, thank you so much for creating that tool and offering that to people. How can people find out more about you and your work and the Anxiety Lab?

**[00:28:27] Amber Benziger**

Yes, they can go to [theanxietylab.com](http://theanxietylab.com) or [ambervsanxiety.com](http://ambervsanxiety.com), and you can find out about all the things I offer, and the card deck.

**Jai Bristow**

Fantastic. Thank you so, so much for your time today, Amber. I think this is a really important topic that we've covered today.

**Amber Benziger**

Yeah, I had so much fun, and I am excited to hear what people have to say.