



How to talk to our children when they are ill – Laura Lane’s interview with Dr. Bernie Siegel Part 1 – Full Transcript

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[Music – Sending a Line by Fiz Anthony]

Thank you for tuning into the Hope Strength Courage Podcast. Love and support for parents whose kids are fighting for their lives! A weekly podcast created to support parents and caregivers of children diagnosed with cancer. Where you will find resources collected to help you face each day with Hope, Strength and Courage. From interviews with the top experts in their fields: doctors, psychologists, chaplains and inspiring frontline workers in pediatric oncology as they share their best advice, as well as day to day advice collected from other cancer moms and leaders in personal growth and development. From individuals who understand how hard it can be, I hope you will feel better prepared to cope with the day-to-day challenges of caring for your child.

Hi, I am Laura Lane, and I am your host. My own daughter Celeste was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 12. In 2015 I wrote about our experiences in the book “Two Mothers One Prayer: Facing your child’s cancer with Hope Strength and Courage”. Since that time, I have dedicated thousands of hours to share with other parents and caregivers the resources, tools, tips, skills and strategies I learned that helped our family to stay happier, healthier and more hopeful. My goal is to share with you my interviews with experts to support you as you care for a child with cancer.

[Music ends]

Today’s episode features my interview with world renown Pediatric surgeon, author and speaker Dr. Bernie Siegel.

What I love most about this interview is Dr. Bernie or just Bernie as he prefers to be called. What I love most about Bernie is his storytelling. I could listen to him all day. He has such an incredible, honest, open way about him with both children and adults. His stories are about not only his patients but his own children. I hope you will enjoy part 1 of my interview with him as much as I did.

I am pleased to formally introduce you to Dr. Bernie Siegel.

Dr. Siegel is a retired clinical professor, pediatric surgeon, renown author and speaker. For many, Bernie needs no introduction. He has touched many lives all over our planet.

Dr. Siegel, who prefers to be called Bernie, not Dr. Siegel, attended Colgate University and Cornell University Medical College. His surgical training took place at Yale New Haven Hospital, West Haven Veteran’s Hospital and the Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh. He



retired from practice as an assistant clinical professor of surgery at Yale of general and pediatric surgery in 1989 to speak to patients and their caregivers.

In 1978 he originated Exceptional Cancer Patients, a specific form of individual and group therapy utilizing patients' drawings, dreams, images and feelings. ECaP is based on "carefrontation," a safe, loving therapeutic confrontation, which facilitates personal lifestyle changes, personal empowerment and healing of the individual's life.

That year he also began talking about patient empowerment and the choice to live fully and die in peace. As a physician, who has cared for and counseled innumerable people whose mortality has been threatened by an illness, Bernie embraces a philosophy of living and dying that stands at the forefront of the medical ethics and spiritual issues our society grapples with today. He continues to assist in the breaking of new ground in the field of healing and personally struggling to live the message of kindness and love. His best-selling books include: *Love, Medicine & Miracles*; *Peace, Love & Healing*; and *How to Live Between Office Visits*.

Bernie has been named one of the top 20 Spiritually Influential Living People on the Planet by the Watkins Review.

Bernie, and his wife and co-worker Bobbie, live in a suburb of New Haven, Connecticut.

I am so glad to have you with us Bernie. Thank you very much.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: Thank you very much and I may make one small correction that was the organization was called exceptional cancer patients not care. Exceptional Cancer Patients.

Laura: Thank you for correcting me on that.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: I mean they were, my wife labelled them as exceptional people so that became the title.

Laura: That's one of the questions I have for you, maybe we will start with that. When you created the exceptional cancer patients, what element of the program could you share that would help parents whose children have cancer that would help them with their child's treatment. Tell us a little more about that program and how it would help.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: The interesting thing was how few people participated. I sent 100 letters to patients with cancer saying if you want to live a longer better life come to a meeting because one of my patients said I need to know how to live between office visits. So that's what I was going to focus on because as doctors you feel a failure because you can't cure every disease. But I realized I could help everybody live, and then I was amazed only 12 women showed up instead of 200 people that I was expecting. And I realized a lot of it has to do with failure. When you say children it's how we're brought up, I mean when someone says my mother's words were eating away at me and maybe gave me cancer, she's afraid that if I try to get well and I don't, I'm a failure again. See, I ask people who do drawings, answer questions, read books, because again it's what's going on within them on another



level. Like what a dream portrays alright and drawings will show the same thing unconscious material. So, you say to somebody, draw a picture, "I'm not an artist" Now that's one place when children tend to have less trouble than adults. Because the kids aren't worried more often about being graded about their art but some of them are. And that's what you have to let your kids know, this is not, we aren't judging you or grading you. You see because when a child in first grade was asked to draw a picture and then the teacher criticized her in second grade, and she wrote about this she said, "when the teacher asked me to draw a picture I left my paper blank."

Dr. Bernie Siegel: Fortunately, she had a wonderful teacher, he re-parented her. Because he said, "the snow fall, clean and white and beautiful." And suddenly she's a success you see and that stayed with her whole life. What I realized was is the children had faith in me. I didn't realize you see, and I train when you're trained as a pediatric surgeon on how to talk to children. I have on my website www.berniesiegelmd.com an article titled "Deceiving People into Health". Cause I realized the kids were listening to me, they had faith in me and their parents.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: They were interpreting what I said in a specific way so if I said you'll go to sleep when you go in the operating room, the kids fell asleep as we wheeled them into the operating room. I realized that's what you told them what would happen.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: And it got to a point where people in the operating room, the nurses and anesthesiologists, used to burst out laughing because all these kids would fall asleep. Because I realized hey it's good for the kids. I laugh every time I tell this because one boy started yelling at me when I picked up him and put him on the operating table. He woke up. I said, "what are you yelling at me for?" and he said, "you told me I was going to sleep and I sleep on my stomach." You see, and I'm turning him back over to get his appendix out. And so, I would lie to them. Take an alcohol sponge and say, "this will numb your skin, so you don't feel the needle". And you would be amazed at the percentage of kids who say, "why don't the other doctors do that?" And some would say "I felt it." but you know it was a totally different reaction to the feeling.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: And so I would say to parents get a bottle of vitamins, if your child has a reaction to whether its chemotherapy, surgery, whatever it is, just say "oh here's a pill that will help you feel better" and you give them a vitamin. And you would be amazed at how many of them, "oh that's wonderful thank you I feel better." I mean even hair growing pills when they're getting chemotherapy. Because again it's easier to hypnotize the kids because they say they have faith in all these people.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: Whereas adults have a tougher time, and they have to work on the imagery. So, help your child visualize what they want to occur. Don't let them be frightened by words, about what's going to happen. Tell them it doesn't have to, that you can change that by picturing it differently. And I give you the advice, I know you know that one of our children at age seven said "I need an x-ray of my leg." Now I was telling him to take a hot



bath because he said my leg hurts, my knee hurts and one day he said, "I need an X-ray". I said, "what do you know about x-rays?" He said, "I need one." Well, the x-ray showed a bone tumor. And boy did I feel terrible and guilty. And I'd say to the parents do what feels right for you. If you're going to have guilt, fine go get your x-rays, go get your tests, you know so that you don't, three months later say "oh god look what I did, I didn't ... " anyway. From the x-ray it looked like a malignant tumor. You know replacing the bone and so forth. I came home after having seen this x-ray. What's in my head as a doctor, 'they'll cut his leg off, he'll probably die in a year.' I mean all this horrible stuff. This is before I got into this kind of work, you know what I mean.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: I am a lot different today if that happened. Because he was my therapist and I would live his message. The next day, he came into the office I have at home, where I'm sitting at the desk. "Dad?" "What is it Keith?" "Can I talk to you for a minute?" "Sure, what is it?" "You're handling this poorly." That's from a seven-year-old! Okay. What does he mean? "We're trying to have a nice day." We have five children. "We're trying to have a nice day and you want us in our room depressed, worrying about next year. Can we please go out and have a nice day?" And that's why I say he became my psychotherapist, and we were very fortunate because he had a rare benign tumor, one that is very painful but is benign. But he taught me a lot and I have seen the change in me over the years and when things happen. I'm not into statistics and what's going to happen to you. I'm into "how do we have a nice day?" Because I've learned what we call, what's the word? Self-induced healing. see if you get well when you're not supposed to the doctor says you had a spontaneous remission or regression. No, it's not spontaneous. It's because of what that child did. I mean here's another specific example, you know my talk about the drawings and the imagery. A boy had a brain tumor. He wrote a book afterwards called "My book for kids with cancer", it's a wonderful story see, and it ends with some day I'm going to grow up and be a doctor and take care of kids with cancer. You see, he turned it into something very positive. But his image was he has these airplanes flying around in his brain blasting the tumor.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: And you know, fine, his parents, you know he's playing a game with it, go ahead and do it.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: The doctors took all his hope away as far as the parents were concerned. But one day the boy said to his parents "I don't see a tumor anymore when I'm doing my, you know, imagery and my airplanes blasting it." and they noticed he was acting better and seemed healthier so they thought well if he's going to die, what the hell, might as well send him to school anyway though, you know.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: Because there is no point in sitting home. So, they send him back to school. A month or so later, in gym he was knocked down during a game and hit his head on the floor and that got everybody frightened because he has a brain tumor, so they send him for X-rays. What was missing, there was no longer any calcification on the X-ray which had been present in the tumor, it was gone, and this tumor never recurred. And so again working with the kids, the imagery, the hope, you know, the one day at a time, because



what you find is, which is harder in adults, that your body feels the chemistry that your emotions present it with. You know as I say Monday morning, well this is another example between kids and adults. I'm giving a lecture at a business where one of our sons happened to work. They had health day for the whole company, so I'm speaking, and I said, "what day of the week is bad for your health?" Well one of our grandchildren was sitting there and he yells, "Saturday!" and his father, our child, said "no, no, Sam that's not the right answer." I said "John, it's a perfect answer." Why? Because what all adults answer, Monday. We have more heart attacks, strokes, suicides. What does a kid answer? Saturday. Why? Because he's having a wonderful day running around knocking himself out and he thinks that's bad for him, you know for his health. No, he gets tired he takes a nap.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: But when emotionally, it's a Monday, you know, "oh I hate it and ugh I have to work" and yeah that affects your health. So again, it's to work at loving your life, loving your body and to let the kids do that as well as adults. To look at what will make you happy and to not be angry at your body for having a disease but loving it. One again just so people know I don't make up any of these stories here's a young lady who had polio as a child, so she was mad at her body for the deformity and then she developed Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, it's called Lou Gehrig's Disease.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: And she's developing paralysis she said I didn't want to die hating my body, so I sat naked in front of the mirror and loved it and she literally told me that she went inch by inch. "I love my toes. I love my foot, my ankle," and she would go through this day after day, until the disease disappeared.

Laura: That's good that's the same thing that Louise Hay did with her cancer as well.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: Yeah. Now again you have to realize that you're not setting yourself up to fail, if you know what I mean. Because I always say this to people that I don't want you looking in the mirror, you know if you don't get well saying "Oh, you dumb bell. You should have done this, or you should have done that." It's about doing what is right for you. So, there are some people who don't want to eat vegetables even though it could be good for you. They would rather have an operation. Fine, that'll do beautifully. Because again, you see, when I talk about deceiving into health, there are people who due to medical errors receive no treatment. The doctors didn't know they weren't treating them. Why? Because they had all the reactions through the treatment, they thought they were getting, including tumor shrinking. Okay, you're not being radiated because the machine was repaired, and they didn't put the radioactive material back in. You're not getting chemotherapy because a nurse makes a mistake and doesn't put it in the solution. But does your hair fall out? Does your skin get red? Does your tumor shrink? Yeah. And these doctors, the reason I heard these stories, is the doctors are so upset that they hadn't treated them. And it went on for many weeks because of the reactions the patients were having.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: And I explained to them don't feel guilty. it's not your fault. They made you believe you were treating them because they acted like the other patients did. And so



that's why I say deceiving people into health is good too. So there's many people I would see in the office that I would treat with, when I say treatments, they weren't considered of any value but when they were told there's nothing else we can do for you, I always came up with something. Okay. And back in the office, you know, regularly and you know gave them a pep talk and did the treatment. And it was amazing how well they would do because of their beliefs and the families are always very grateful.

Laura: There was something that we found that with my daughter when she was going through her treatments and Haley was going through hers at the same time. They were usually one or two days ... Haley's treatments were usually one or two days ahead of Celeste's and so Haley's counts would go up and I'd tell Celeste "Oh Haley's counts went up yesterday" and sure enough the next day Celeste's counts would go up, because that's what she expected was supposed to happen.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: Right.

Laura: We planted the idea in her head and her body went 'oh is that what I'm supposed to do? Okay I'll do that.'

Dr. Bernie Siegel: That's why I say the imagery of treatment in a positive, you know, way changes that. Because we know again from studies, people's white counts are going down on the way to treatment, before you even get there. And the other is, you see, especially with kids you could say "oh your white cells are like popcorn, so make a lot of you know popcorn."

Dr. Bernie Siegel: And their counts go up again. Yeah, but again, it's find an image that works for them, if you know what I mean. Because if you decide what the image should be, but it doesn't feel right for the child or your family member then it's not going to have that powerful effect. As I often say it's not about killing, you see that the child let an airplane blasting his tumor, fine that's his game. Okay but I've had patients that say I don't want to kill anything. So, they have to have a way of carrying it away, one person it's a block of ice, god's light will melt it, you know, yeah.

Laura: That's exactly what we did.

Dr. Bernie Siegel: You could have a pet dog eating up your tumor you know, cleaning your immune system so it doesn't feel like something bad it's protecting me and helping me.

Laura: Yeah, those are all wonderful ideas.

This interview is one of my favourites. Please join us for part 2 next week as I continue the interview to learn more about the books Bernie has written and to hear more of his wonderful funny stories.

To learn more about Dr. Bernie Seigel, you can visit his website berniesiegelmd.com -that's B E R N I E S I E G E L M D .COM.



Before we end our show today, we have one last segment. Over the last few years, I have asked other cancer moms what advice they wish they had known when their child was first diagnosed. I have compiled that information and will be sharing their advice each week. You can download the top 101 pieces of advice that I put together as a mini E-book at www.twomothersoneprayer.com/advice.

Today's advice comes from Missy:

She said, "This is kind of small in the grand scheme of things, but it really helped us out. We would put numbing cream over my son's port before leaving for clinic. Then We had to put one of those very sticky bandages over it. Peeling the bandage off hurt him and made his skin so raw. Someone told us to cut a piece of Glad Press and Seal to put over the cream. It stuck to his skin just enough to keep the cream in place and didn't irritate his skin. This was a huge thing for us." Thanks, Missy, for sharing that.

If you have advice you have learned along the way that you wish someone had told you weeks, months or years earlier, I invite you to fill out the contact form on our website www.twomothersoneprayer.com/contact and I will be sharing your advice with our listeners on future shows.

[Music in background]

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule today to listen to the Hope Strength Courage Podcast. I look forward to sharing more experts and advice with you again next Wednesday. Please remember to take a minute to subscribe to the show. Thanks also need to go out to our Hope Strength Courage Production Team which consists of Kyle Outridge Productions and music by Fiz Anthony. To learn more about myself Laura Lane and to order my book please visit www.twomothersoneprayer.com.

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