

## Episode 10: Health in All Policies: Advocating for Child and Families: Featuring Dr. Tina Cheng and Dr. Stephanie Ettinger De Cuba

Podcast transcript

“I think one thing is to trust in your own abilities... like from that direct experience, those are super valuable. And to document what you're seeing... because that's what policymakers want to hear. They want to hear those real-life stories like how does this make a difference in the real world?” -Stephanie Ettinger De Cuba, PhD, MPH

**Robert Sege:** Welcome to the HOPEful Conversations about Child Development podcast series. I'm Bob Sege, a pediatrician and director of the HOPE National Resource Center at Tufts Medicine.

**Baraka Floyd:** And I'm Baraka Floyd, a community pediatrician at Stanford and HOPE Facilitator and Champion. The Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences, or HOPE framework, emphasizes the Building Blocks that children need to thrive: relationships, environments, engagement, and emotional growth. In this podcast, we interview leaders in child health and development in order to learn more about how to support families in creating positive childhood experiences for their children. You can learn more about HOPE by visiting our website [positiveexperience.org](http://positiveexperience.org).

**Sege:** We are back this week with Dr. Tina Cheng, Chair of Pediatrics at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, Director of Cincinnati Children's Research Foundation, and Chief Medical Officer at Cincinnati Children's Medical Center. Also, we have with us the wonderful Stephanie Ettinger De Cuba, who's the Chief Executive Director of Children's Health Watch, a nonpartisan network of pediatricians, public health researchers and policy experts who collect real time data from urban hospitals and tell us how infants and toddlers are doing, how they're facing economic hardship, and how we can share these findings, for children's health through changes in policy and research. Each of you last week talked to us about your own research journey and I loved especially how from really different perspectives, you've both come to a process that includes from the very beginning the individuals and communities that we're talking about, the children and their families. So thank you and welcome back to HOPEful Conversations.

**Stephanie Ettinger De Cuba:** It's great to be here. Thank you.

**Tina Cheng:** Great to be here.

**Floyd:** We're so happy to have you both. Both of your bodies of work exemplify the importance of influencing policy. And with our network of HOPE Champions, we talk about HOPE-Informed policies, essentially policies that increase access to the Four Building Blocks. Can you share a success story of your work influencing HOPE-Informed policy?

**Cheng:** So, last episode I talked a little bit about the National Academy of Science, Engineering and Medicine and how the report on launching lifelong health by improving health care for children, youth and families that really laid out the evidence on what children and families need and what interventions really make a difference. The report also had some specific recommendations on how do we elevate

child health and really move the needle on health outcomes. And, there were a few things that were really highlighted. First, we need a vision and a plan around child health and how to get there. Children are often an afterthought and we don't have a real plan around children. The report really emphasized the need for a body to get together to develop a plan to have metrics and monitor that plan over time. Maybe it's a cabinet member was mentioned. Actually Canada has a cabinet member that is focused on child health. Some [U.S.] states have a child health policy person whose job it is to think about child health and families. So we need some kind of national structure. And I would say states also need some kind of structure where we're always thinking about children. And finally I think that we need to be thinking about child health and wellbeing in all of our policies. If there's a policy on housing, how does that specifically affect child health? How does that specifically affect health equity? If there's an environmental policy, how does that affect children who are going to be exposed to this potential environmental exposure for a whole lifetime? And how does it affect families? How does it affect disadvantaged communities? So it's kind of like environmental impact statements. There is a requirement that there's an environmental impact statement on policies to really consider, environmental impact. We need a child health and health equity impact statement related to all policies because child health and health equity may be affected by just about every policy that we have. So those are a few of the recommendations that were part of the report. And we have been working to get the message out to the public and the policymakers because this is really what we need on the high level of what we really need in this country to improve the health of children.

**Floyd:** And it makes me think about the possibilities if we utilize the health in all policies approach, how many children could have safer, more equitable environments, have stronger relationships with other adults outside of their home, and could have a healthier environment, more engagement and more opportunities for emotional growth. Because so often the policies that we create take away access to those things because they're not thought of. Stephanie, would you want to share, an opportunity where you had success of your work creating or influencing help informed policy?

**Ettinger De Cuba:** Yeah, I think what I'd like to talk about is some work my team and I did on. We lead a coalition here in Massachusetts called the Healthy Families Tax Credits Coalition. It's a statewide nonpartisan, network of advocates working to improve the health and wellbeing of Massachusetts children and families with the focus being on expanding the state Earned Income Tax Credit, or EITC, and the Child and Family Tax Credit. So it's led by Children's Health Watch, but it has pretty broad membership. It consists of community-based agencies, legal advocates, researchers, professional associations, social service providers, tax preparers, health providers, and then Massachusetts workers and their families. So really like directly the people who are impacted. So just some quick background, just so that the rest of what I say makes sense. The EITC is a federal credit. A lot of states have passed policies to provide a state match, basically. So a state EITC is a percent of the federal. So just to use easy numbers, if the federal credit is \$100 and the state match is 15%, then you'd get \$15 from the state and \$100 from the federal government. So since 2015, our network has successfully advocated to increase the state EITC. And I think a really key part of the shift that happened was framing it as being about healthy families. It previously had been framed around poverty and economic activity and that sort of thing, which are all true and not wrong. And we still talk about those benefits as well. Reducing poverty, increasing people's workforce, engagement, that sort of thing. But since we took it over and kind of reframed, in collaboration with all the folks who'd been doing it for a long time, as well as lots of new partners, we've really had a lot of success. Since 2015. We've gotten the state EITC first increase to 23% of the federal credit, then 30 and now it's up to 40. And we're working on getting it to 50% of the federal credit, which is hundreds and in some cases thousands of dollars back in people's pockets. We've also been able to expand eligibility to survivors of domestic violence and abandoned spouses. Also most recently were able to pass a robust and inclusive child and family tax credit, which is basically, kind of inspired by the National Advanced Child Tax Credit. It was two credits that were



separate, where they've brought them together and increased the amount that now basically recognizes that caregiving is costly and time consuming and we need to help people. And so it's for children, but also for families who are caring, say for like a disabled adult or someone with a developmental delay who needs, you know, daily care. And we've also gotten the state to invest state dollars into the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program or VITA program. Because great to have a policy, but if you don't then implement it and people don't get access to it, doesn't really help them out so much. This way is like, yes, there's a tax credit and also here's where you can file for it for free and you don't have to go to these for profit tax preparers. So I, you know, I think we've had a lot of success with that. Now we also maintain a website called [findyourfunds.org](http://findyourfunds.org) that, is a site for Massachusetts residents that has information on available, available tax credits and ways to file. And all of the messaging is very HOPE-aligned. It's very much about how we can help families to be healthier when they're more connected, when they are able to meet their needs, family members have time to spend time together. Recognizes that caregiving is hard and costly, but in a way that's supportive and affirmative. And so all of that has been really attractive to policymakers because I think, you know, it taps into their own experiences as, oh yeah, actually being a parent, it's actually pretty challenging and it's gotten a lot of support on both sides of the aisle. But it's also also, you know, while it's supporting relationships, it's also about environment because there's lots of great research that demonstrates how when people get access to the EITC or now we have the national example of the Advanced Child Tax Credit, what families can do with that, flexible money then to improve their environment and the ways that they need to improve their environment, not what I think they should do, but what they need to do. And they're no longer kind of in the, like, where's my next meal coming from? How am I keeping my roof over my head? But rather, you know, being able to kind of lift their eyes and think beyond that. So I think it can be really powerful.

**Cheng:** I love Stephanie's example. And, I often feel that in child advocacy we need the wisdom, the will and the wallet. I feel like, you know, she's talked about the wisdom we have, the research around child tax credits and how that does improve health and wellbeing and, you know, we need the will and the advocacy and the wallet. It reminds me of a review that Isaacs and Schroeder did of U.S. public health successes. They looked at things like smoking, lead poisoning, fluoridation of water, auto safety. And the key factors were highly credible scientific evidence, strong advocates, partnership with the media for public awareness and law and regulation. So I feel like it's the wisdom, the will and the wallet, that we need to really, move the dialogue.

**Ettinger De Cuba:** I love that.

**Sege:** I love this. I just want to say that last year we looked at what are the economic consequences of positive childhood experiences, and they run into the hundreds of billions of dollars, maybe even more than that if you multiply it out. So I love when Stephanie was talking about an investment because it's not an expense, it's an investment. Because we know that investing in children and their families improves the economy and improves all of us. And Tina, I love what you just added in about the kinds of expert that make change happen. And I'd like to take that and move us to the next step because many of our listeners are HOPE champions or people who deliver care or run programs that deliver care, but they're not researchers. So do you, either of you have practical advice for people who are not researchers on how they can take this incredible body of knowledge that you both have helped create and use it to make up, policies that promote relationships, environment, emotional growth, engagement?

**Ettinger De Cuba:** Yeah, I mean, I, I think one thing is to trust in your own abilities. Right? Like the stories from the, the quote unquote ground, like from that, you know, direct experience is those are super valuable. And to document what you're seeing, talk to your colleagues, talk to, I don't know if it's



clients or whoever it is, but like learning to document what you're seeing because that's what policymakers want to hear. They want to hear those real life stories like how does this make a difference in the real world? So I think that is really helpful. I also think when you're thinking about what policies you might want to support or maybe advocate against, it's, you know, assessing that policy through the HOPE lens. I think the HOPE lens is very useful, for thinking about, you know, things like does this policy give families, the financial or the mental space to meet their needs? Does it create space for parents to care for themselves in a way that in turn cares for their child, you know, allow them to have more patience, less stress, more presence? Is it a policy that creates more hoops and roadblocks? Probably that's one that's not HOPE-aligned. Right. It makes me think. We did some research that hopefully will be out soon about the advanced child tax credit, and there was a whole set of quotes from mothers talking about how those monthly payments allowed them to attend to their family's unique needs. So I think, you know, those are the kinds of policies that allow families to pay attention to what they need to be, tailored to the specific supports they need to the relationships to improve their environments, all those kinds of things. So thinking about, do I want to put my energy behind this policy? Do I want to advocate against this policy? Using the HOPE framework is really great. And then also, yeah, again, trusting in your own experience and the stories that you can collect from your colleagues and your own experience. Experience will be very powerful for policy and advocacy.

**Cheng:** Yeah, I guess I would just add that, you know, research is really important for that scientific evidence of what works or what doesn't work. Quality implementation is really key. We can come up, we can find that there's a great program that works, but if it's not implemented in a quality way, it may not work. So I think that executing on what that research shows in the best practice possible way. I also feel like we are all child advocates and we all have a role in not just creating scientific evidence, but also in that advocacy, partnership and public awareness and discussion and really trying to push law and regulation that really can make a difference for children and families.

**Ettinger De Cuba:** And very selfishly, but I think it's a lot of researchers out there too that really want to be engaged with the community and they may not know how. So I think there, there are lots of folks who want to be your partner and so reaching out to whoever, your local research entity, university, whatever. I think there are lots of willing hearts just not maybe schooled just yet and how to, and how to get it done.

**Sege:** I think researchers are often really struggle to communicate with the public and policymakers and what a wonderful opportunity for partnership. And each of you exemplifies the partnership between researchers and people who actually do the work, as Tina said, who implement it and make it happen. And so many people who are listening to this podcast are actually the people who make it happen. This is really terrific advice.

**Floyd:** Thank you so much. I'm so motivated after this conversation. I really appreciate, Dr. Cheng, you highlighting the fact that we're all child advocates. Because we are doing this work when we want to see the best for children's health and health in all policies approach really allows for us to open up access to the HOPE Building Blocks for children to promote their lifelong health. Also the importance of trusting ourselves, trusting our perspective, and really assuring that as we're doing this work on the ground, on the forefront, that we're watching out for opportunities for us to be able to collect real world data. Because our real world data and experience, is so valuable because it helps us to understand how these policies impact families on the ground. And it helps us to be able to craft types of stories that legislators and regulators need to understand why policy changes might be important. We also heard how important it is to really look at policies through the HOPE lens and that can help us understand if we should advocate for or against the policy and as we're thinking about the execution,



which is so important, we can also think about the execution through a HOPE-Informed lens. If we're executing a policy in such a way that it doesn't allow for a family to easily get through, then the execution is also not HOPE-Informed. And so I just want to thank you all, for taking the time to have this conversation with us. And thank you for your time for this HOPEful conversation.

**Ettinger De Cuba:** Great. Thank you so much. It was wonderful to be here. Thank you.

**Sege:** The HOPEful Conversations About Child Development podcast was produced by Kris Markman and Patricia Reyes at the Tufts Clinical and Translational Science Institute. Funding for this podcast was provided by the Freedom Together Foundation. For more information, a transcript, and resources related to today's HOPEful Conversation, please visit us at [positiveexperience.org](http://positiveexperience.org) or follow us on LinkedIn.