

## Chapter 3

# Educating Adults to Talk about Death and Dying to Assist Grieving Children: A Community Development Project

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### ABSTRACT

*This qualitative research study took place in Central Texas and is rooted in the principles of collaborative action research. This research approach was useful to gather facts, define the problem, engage study participants, and come up with a product that fit the community need defined by Compassionate Heart Hospice, the focal study setting. The research questions are: How can we use the pillars of community development to identify needs and assets within the hospice setting? What can bereavement facilitators working at hospice do to educate adults to talk about death and dying to assist grieving children? Data collection sources include: interviews, written reflections, field notes, documents (e.g., hospice fliers, brochures, and written information), and site observations and visits. Study findings are presented through the following three themes: (1) hospice and the pillars of community development, (2) educating adults to assist grieving children, and (3) creating a curricular guide for bereavement facilitators. The chapter includes an introduction, a description of the four pillars of community development (physical capital, intellectual and human capital, social capital, and financial capital) as explained by Ferguson and Dickens (1999), a section addressing why educating adults on death and dying is relevant, and a section on grief as a process. After that, the authors provide all relevant details describing the qualitative methodology for the implementation of the study (e.g., study settings, study participants, data collection sources, data analysis) and conclusion.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*As Eimmy gets ready to work with a group of grieving children, she gathers the necessary items to create the eruption of a volcano as a metaphor of death and the eruption of multiple emotions and feelings. Eimmy talks to the children about how the volcano could represent each of them individually, or as their own family. She also focuses on the landscape surrounding the volcano as an opportunity to talk about the changes experienced after the death of their loved one. Everyone in the group shares feelings that are part of their grief; they share their feelings as they deposit a spoon full of baking soda inside the volcano. Others wanted to deposit a larger amount to represent the extent of their feelings. Immediately after, each participant chooses a color to represent his or her feeling. Again, the amount of food color is up to the participant, and it goes from a few drops to several squirts. After all the participants shared their feelings, Eimmy talks about the vinegar as the element that is going to toss around the environment of the volcano, just the way death has disturbed their lives. As the vinegar is poured into the volcano it triggers an overwhelming multicolored eruption representing the distressing eruption of feelings provoked by grief. Those feelings explode over and affect the landscape of our lives as the lava affects the scenery around a volcano. Eimmy talks about all of those changes as children get excited trying to recognize their feeling among the erupting baking soda. When everything simmers down, Eimmy adds, everything has changed, and it is time to analyze the new environment and decide when to move forward. Children come to the conclusion that death stinks, just as the vinegar, but at the end of the activity, they all had a chance to normalize their feelings and realize that their grief reactions are common among the group participants.*

During her interview, Eimmy, a study participant, provided the above example to illustrate the type of interaction and activities that adults can implement

to assist grieving children. Through this activity, the facilitator helps the children to identify the language to describe the feelings that are part of their grief experience. The example provided by Eimmy helps us illustrate the goal of this chapter identifying appropriate practices educating adults to talk about death and dying so that they can assist grieving children.

The research questions guiding the chapter include: How can we use the pillars of community development to identify needs and assets within the hospice setting? What can bereavement facilitators working at hospice do to educate adults to talk about death and dying to assist grieving children? The study draws on the principles of collaborative action research since the main concern faced by *Compassionate Heart Hospice* (pseudonym) was the limited services they offered that centered attention on grief support for the patients' children and young adult family members. Using the principles of collaborative action research and the pillars of community development as a framework (Ferguson & Dickens, 1999), we worked in collaboration to identify a community need and as a result a curricular guide for bereavement facilitators emerged. The four pillars of community development identified by Ferguson and Dickens include: Physical capital, intellectual and human capital, social infrastructure, and financial capital. Using the framework described by Ferguson and Dickens (1999) was crucial in approaching community development from an assets-based view. We were able to identify a community need and describe the assets that the hospice and its community already count on to assist them in realizing their strengths and capitals.

## **FOUR PILLARS OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

For Ferguson and Dickens (1999) community development is assets-building improving the quality of life among residents of low- to moderate-income communities. These authors define communities

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