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Studio DöBra **Toolbox**

Using arts to support conversations between children and older adults about dying, death and loss.

This material was developed collaboratively by Karolinska Institutet, the municipality of Halmstad, Design Lab S, and activity centers for older adults and relatives in Skärholmen. This is an English translation of the original Swedish version 'DöBra Ateljé Verktyglåda' from May 2019. The development process was carried out with the support of an Engagement Grant from Karolinska Institutet (Kleijberg 2018).

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Graphic design and illustrations by Hanna Hallén.



DESIGN LAB S

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Using arts to support conversations between children and older adults about dying, death and loss.

What?

Studio DöBra is a project in which children (9 years old) and older adults (65+) meet to talk about dying, death and loss by doing different arts projects together. This toolbox is based on the research project Studio DöBra, which began in 2016 at Karolinska Institutet as part of the DöBra research program. Read more about this on [page 17](#).

Why?

Dying, death, and loss affect us all, both young and old, but talking about these experiences may be difficult. The exercises in the toolbox provide opportunities to think about and express feelings about these topics without having to put them into words. New relationships have the potential to develop in meetings between children and older adults in societies with few intergenerational meeting places. We can learn a lot from one another's thoughts and experiences.

For whom?

This toolbox is intended for those of you who are interested in stimulating conversations about dying, death, and loss with the help of arts and creative expression. You may be a teacher, an artist, an activity leader, a healthcare worker, or someone who is curious about discussing these important topics. We, the authors of this toolbox, work as artists, designers, researchers, and as developers of cultural activities in Swedish municipalities. We participated in this project in our professional capacities but also simply as human beings.

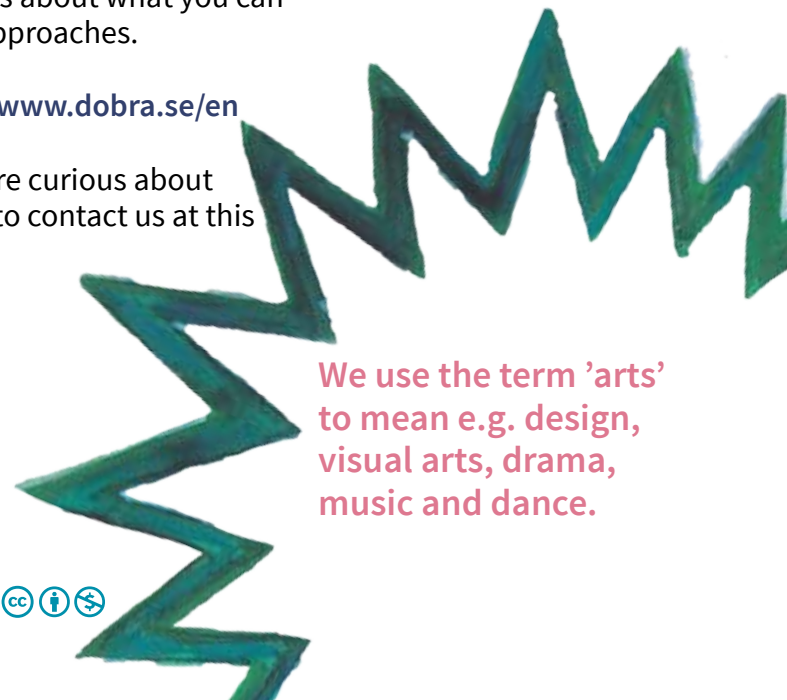
How?

Part 1 – Practical tips is intended to give you suggestions about how you can go about developing and facilitating intergenerational meetings about dying, death, and loss. In this section, we focus on four themes: Working together with children and older adults, Using arts in conversations about dying, death and loss, Choosing a place for conversations about dying, death and loss, and Making time for conversations about dying, death, and loss. The toolbox doesn't have to be read from cover to cover; you can focus on the parts that you find important or inspiring!

Part 2 – Examples of exercises are intended to give you practical examples of how we have worked in Studio DöBra. In this section, we describe some of the exercises we used in Studio DöBra and give tips about what you can consider in terms of materials and approaches.

The toolbox can be downloaded at: www.dobra.se/en

We, the developers of this toolbox, are curious about what you think of it. Please feel free to contact us at this email address: dobra@ki.se



We use the term 'arts' to mean e.g. design, visual arts, drama, music and dance.

Part 1: Practical tips




Working together with children and older adults

Why?

Dying, death and loss are experiences we will all be confronted with sooner or later in our lives, but may rarely talk about. Through the project Studio DöBra, we have learned that there is both an interest and a need to talk about these topics among children and older adults. The intergenerational meetings can provide the participants with opportunities to exchange experiences and reflections about dying, death, and loss.

We have also learned that our own experiences of dying death, and loss influence the ways we work, just as our assumptions about participants influence their experiences. In Studio DöBra, we have seen that we, **the adults in between**, generally have a lot of influence over other age groups. It is therefore important to reflect on your own role in working with children and older adults.

When you invite participants, be open about the purpose of the project, what you will do, and that participation is voluntary. Be clear that the intention of the project is to create the opportunity to engage together in issues about dying, death, and loss, and not for therapeutic purposes.



With the term 'adults in between', we mean the group of adults who are responsible for, or work with children and/or older adults. This might be the children's teachers, parents, or legal guardians for example, or the older adults' relatives or healthcare staff.

Tips!

- To get in touch with children and older adults, make contact with key people such as parents, teachers, and healthcare staff.
- Feel free to talk about your own experiences, thoughts, and questions about death and loss before inviting participants to the project. Be aware that your own experiences can affect the encounters and conversations among participants.
- Make sure that all participants are seen and heard during the meetings, use nametags.
- Mix children and older adults in small groups; we found that this makes the atmosphere more relaxed.

Questions to think about

- What experiences, thoughts, and questions do you have related to dying, death, and loss?
- Are you both the project initiator and group leader? Who will facilitate the meetings and who decides what you will do?
- How much should you steer the conversations between the children and the older adults?
- How do you handle feelings that may arise during the meetings, both from participants and those of you organizing the meetings?
- Who is responsible for the project participants?

Using arts in conversations about dying, death and loss

Why?

Experiences, thoughts, and questions related to dying, death, and loss can be difficult to put into words. Working artistically provides an opportunity to use metaphors, symbols, and images as an alternative. It also creates space to both play and be serious. When you work with arts, participants can decide for themselves how much they would like to talk or if they would rather focus on creating.

It is important to map out the resources available, to create the best possible conditions for the participants and their conversations. Resources can include materials and tools, but also knowledge and experience.

Tips!

- It is important to acknowledge the participants as artists and respect their processes and products.
- It is important to have a clear plan for the creative process, but be brave enough to change the plan when needed!
- Focus on the process instead of the results.
- Use materials that are readily available e.g. furnishings, materials from nature or from a recycling station. Explore the unexpected!

Questions to think about

- How can you involve the participants in developing the creative exercises?
- How can you work with dying, death, and loss both through play and being serious?



Choosing a place for conversations about dying, death and loss



Why?

Many societies today lack places where children and older adults naturally meet. We have learned that the choice of space and place affect the intergenerational meetings and conversations about death and loss. It is also important that the space provides the best possible conditions for all participants to feel welcome, regardless of their age.

Tips!

- It can be good if the participating children and older adults live in the same neighborhood. This can create conditions that make it possible for participants to also meet outside of the project.
- Make sure that there is comfortable furniture for all participants and that this is arranged so that everyone can hear what is said.
- It can be good to hold the meetings at a neutral place, so that everyone can feel welcome regardless of age, social and religious background.

Questions to think about

- If you hold repeated meetings, should they all be at the same place?
- How can you adapt the space and rearrange furnishings to create the best possible conditions for the participants?

Making time for conversations about dying, death, and loss

Why?

There are opportunities for conversations at different times during a meeting—during the artistic exercises, during a break while enjoying a snack and something to drink, and during conversations led by facilitators. Interesting conversations can occur when you least expect them.

In Studio DöBra we found that older participants often gave children the possibility to talk first, before they began to talk themselves. Those facilitating a meeting have an important task in ensuring that everyone who wants to talk gets time and space to do so. We could also see that there was less conversation if a creative exercise was too complicated or if a meeting had too many components. It is therefore important to plan the meetings so that there is time for unstructured conversation. Also remember that children and adults may perceive time differently and therefore may not experience the length of the meetings in the same way.

Tips!

- Make sure to take a refreshment break during the meeting, partly for more energy, but also because it may create a good space for conversation.
- Not everyone needs to talk and it is important to respect that. You do not have to be worried if there are few conversations about death and loss; a lot of reflection goes on through the creative exercises.
- Be sensitive and responsive to the participants' needs and wishes, and be open to adapting your planning if meaningful conversations are already taking place.

Questions to think about

- If you intend to have several meetings, should all of them be planned beforehand or should you plan as you go?
- Participants have time to think and reflect between meetings. As a facilitator, how can you capture these reflections when you meet again?



Part 2: Examples of exercises



What reflections do we have about dying, death, and loss? – Making a mind map

What?

A mind map.

Why?

Creating a mind map can help stimulate thoughts and conversations around the participants' relation to dying, death, and loss. This also helps to create a common vocabulary.

The group can get to know each other by working with the mind map, and it becomes easier for participants to express their reflections in future conversations when they have a common vocabulary. The mind map itself can be used as a starting point for other meetings.

Time?

At least an hour.

Material?

- A big piece of paper for each group.
- One pen for each participant, preferably different colors.
- A big table so that everyone gets a place and can see.

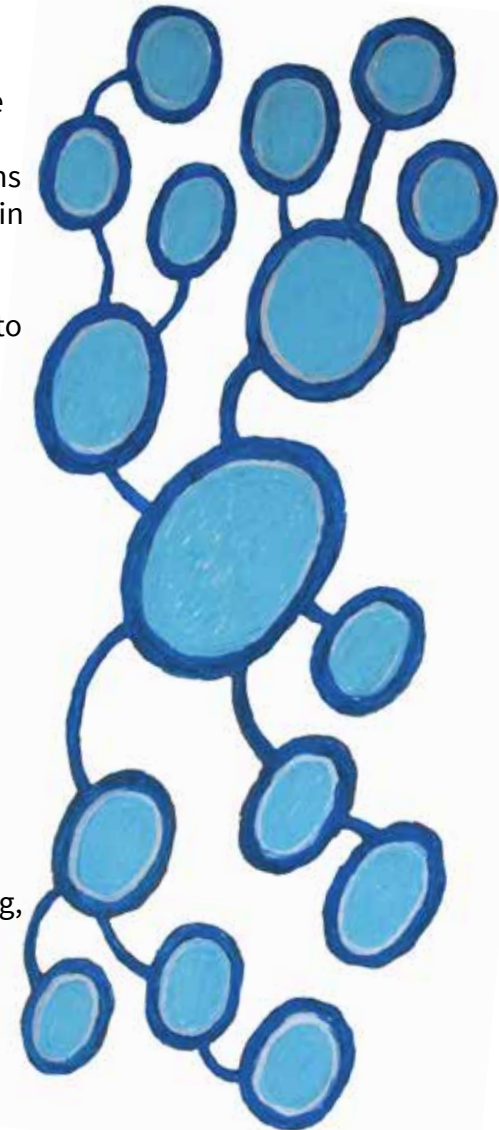
How?

1. Divide the participants into two groups with the children in one group and the older participants in the other. Give each group a piece of paper and each participant a pen.
2. To start the conversation, it may be good to ask questions about death. In Studio DöBra we chose to ask questions in relation to the five senses: How does death taste? What does death look like? How does death sound? How does death smell? How does death feel? Making associations to the senses can open conversations.
3. Write the questions down on the piece of paper. Then encourage the participants to associate freely, write or draw their ideas, and draw connections. Check with the groups to see when they feel that their mind maps are completed.
4. When the groups are done creating their mind maps, the next step is to gather together and look at them. Discuss similarities and differences between the mind maps.

Tips!

- Every participant should have their own pen so that everyone can contribute to the mind map.
- Tell the participants clearly that there is no right or wrong, and that all ideas are welcome.
- A variation of the exercise is to make a joint mind map with the whole group.

This exercise was developed in Studio DöBra Halmstad.



Where do we go after we die? – Using the metaphor of a journey

What?

A travel guide with mode of transportation.

Why?

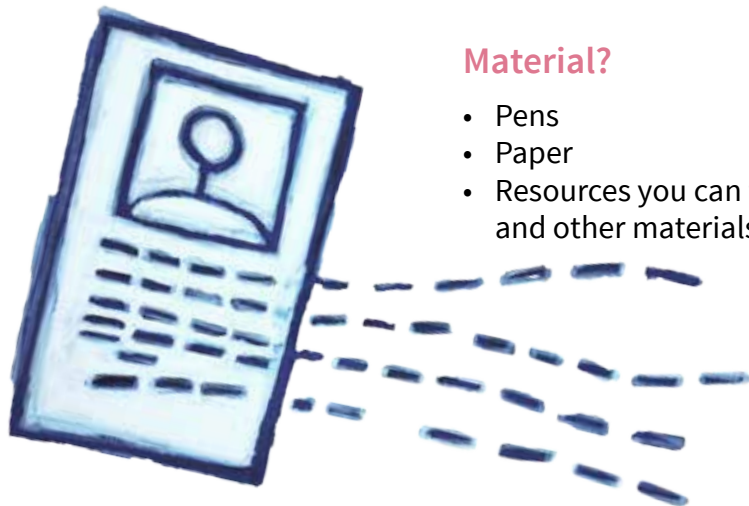
Using the idea of a journey as a metaphor can open conversations about what might happen after life. By making a travel guide, the participants have the opportunity to imagine what happens after we die, without being bound to pre-existing notions. The travel guide and mode of transportation provide a playful way to create personal answers to big and important questions.

Time?

About 2 hours.

Material?

- Pens
- Paper
- Resources you can find around you such as furnishings and other materials.



How?

1. Divide the participants into small groups, with children and older adults mixed.
2. Encourage each group to imagine together different 'post-death destinations' to include in the travel guide. After that the groups describe this destination through their own words and drawings. When the groups are done, all the destinations can be put together into a joint travel guide.
3. When the travel guide is completed, it is time to build the vehicle that will take the whole group to the various destinations. The participants can build this vehicle together, with materials that are available in the room.
4. Finish this exercise with groups playing with the travel guide and vehicle, instead of a more traditional presentation of their work.

Tips!

- Save the travel guides so that they can be shared with others.
- You may use some pre-defined questions to stimulate participants' ideas.

This exercise was developed in Studio DöBra Skärholmen.

How does grief feel? – Making a composition with flowers

What?

A composition of fresh flowers.

Why?

Flowers have strong symbolic value when it comes to grief. During the exercise you can raise and discuss questions such as: Can we approach this subject by working practically? Is showing grief a weakness or a strength? The exercise is not physically demanding because participants can either use scissors or their hands in working with the flowers.

Time?

About 2 hours.

Material?

- Fresh flowers
- Paper
- Glue

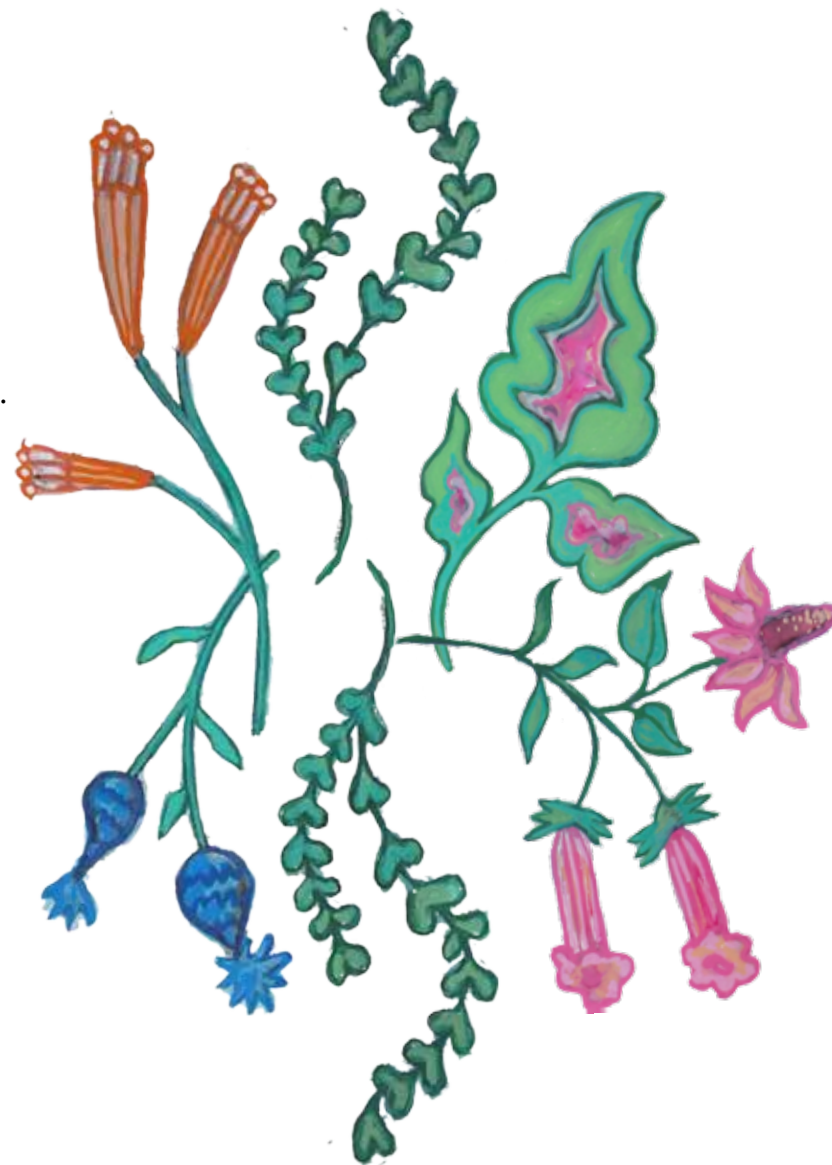
How?

1. Discuss the question ‘How does grief feel?’ with the whole group.
2. Divide the participants in small groups, mixing children and older participants.
3. Encourage the groups to make an abstract composition of flowers based on their ideas about grief. Discuss the word ‘composition’ so that there is a shared understanding of the exercise.
4. The groups choose the flowers to use in their compositions.
5. The groups then present their finished compositions for each other and talk about what they are trying to express.

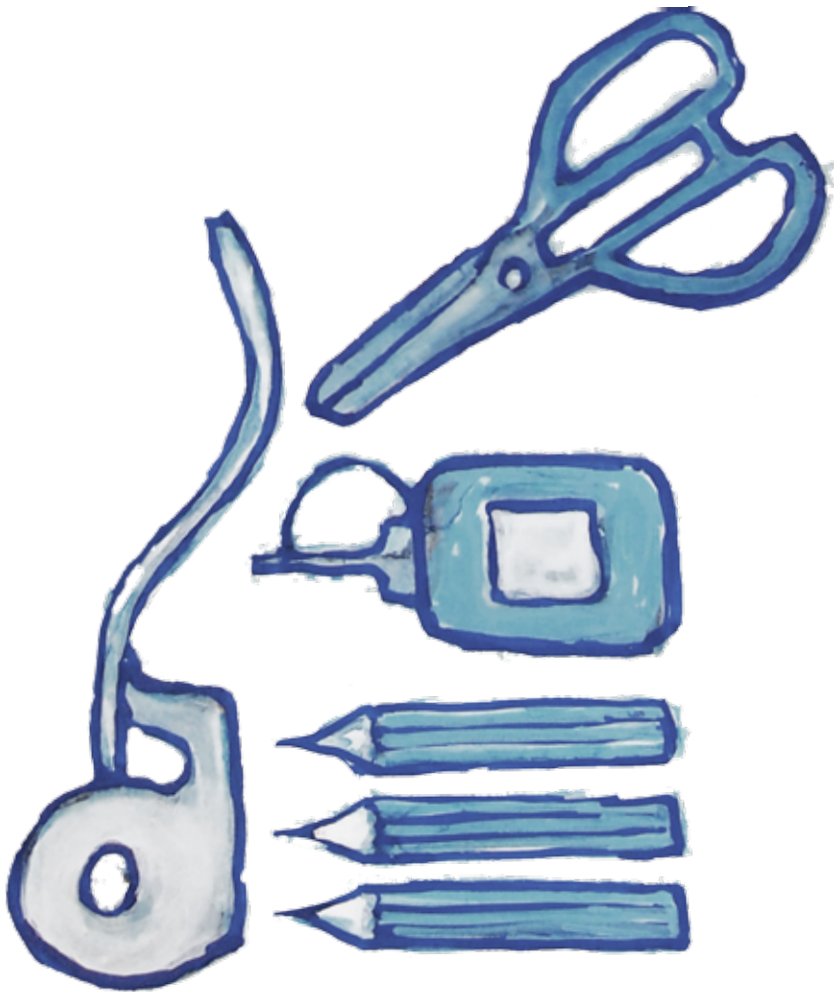
Tips!

- After the exercise, you can dry the compositions and frame the results. The results become permanent and can be used in exhibitions, e.g. in places where older adults gather or in a school.
- If it is too expensive to buy flowers, you can use flowers and leaves that you’ve picked outdoors together.
- A flower can be seen as a metaphor for life and death, grief and happiness. You can explore the symbolism of flowers in conversations during the exercise.

This exercise was developed in Studio DöBra Skärholmen.



Can we visualize death and grief? – Making a collage



What?

A collage of images.

Why?

Making a collage is a relatively simple technique that many people are familiar with. The aim of creating a collage is to visualize a feeling, a word, or an experience through images.

Time?

About 2 hours.

Material?

- A large sheet of paper in any color.
- Visual material in the form of magazines, photos, stickers, gift wrap.
- Glue
- Scissors

How?

1. Divide the participants into groups of four, with two children and two older participants.
2. The small groups each choose a word, concept or subject they want to explore together by making a collage. If the exercise with mind maps (page 11) has been done, those can be used as inspiration.
3. The process tool (page 16) can be used to support participants' work on their collages.
4. The groups can then present their finished collages for each other and talk about what they are trying to express.

Tips!

- Not everyone may know what a collage is. Show some examples to illustrate the technique.
- Cut out images in advance, so that participants don't need to spend so much time finding visual material. It is important to not only choose images you personally associate with dying, death, and loss.
- As a rule of thumb, more scissors than glue sticks are needed.

This exercise was developed in Studio DöBra Halmstad.

How do we show grief? – Working with symbols for grief

What?

A modern version of a mourning ribbon.

Why?

The use of symbols is universal but their meaning can change over time and they can be used for different things in different cultures. A black mourning ribbon was a traditional textile symbol that people in Sweden used to communicate that they were in mourning. The aim of making a modern version of a mourning ribbon is to explore ways in which feelings can be communicated through symbols.

Time?

At least 2 hours.

Material?

- Fabric (different colors and patterns)
- Sewing needles
- Thread
- Glue
- Buttons, shells, old necklaces, and other odds and ends.

How?

1. Begin by discussing symbols for grief and mourning that are used now and were used in the past, for example a mourning ribbon or particular clothes. Show images if possible.
2. Divide the participants into groups of four, with two children and two older participants in each group. Talk about grief in relation to color, form, and material in the groups. Feel free to use questions such as: What color is grief? What shape is grief – is it round, angular, spiky etc.? How does the shape feel – is it soft, rough, cold, furry, etc.?
3. The participants then decide whether they want to make an individual grief-symbol, or work jointly in their small groups.
4. The process tool ([page 16](#)) can be used to support participants' work on their symbols.
5. When the participants have completed their symbols, gather together so that each group can share the symbols and their meaning.

Tips!

Give the older participants the opportunity to talk about their own experiences and about how grief was expressed when they were young.

This exercise was developed in Studio DöBra Halmstad.



Process-tool

This process-tool can be used to help plan the artistic work in the exercises.



Idea

What do I want to create an image of?

What do I want to communicate?

Sketch

How do I want to communicate it?

What shapes and colors should I use?

Assemble

Choose materials and see how they fit together before you start cutting and gluing.

Finish

Can I make the image clearer?

Can something be improved?

Background to the Studio DöBra Toolbox

This material is based on the research project **Studio DöBra**, which began in 2016 at Karolinska Institutet as part of the DöBra research program.

The DöBra research program

DöBra is a national research program in Sweden, which aims to raise issues about dying, death, and loss to enable preparation for encounters with the end of life. The research is primarily based at Karolinska Institutet but also at Umeå University. In this research program, we work to support competency development and support individuals, communities, and healthcare staff to better be able to deal with end-of-life issues, both within and outside health and social care systems.

The overall goal of DöBra is to reduce avoidable suffering related to dying, death and grief, and to use innovative means of integrating rigorous research and sustainable change processes.

Read more about the research program at www.dobra.se/en

Research project Studio DöBra

Studio DöBra is one of the research projects within the DöBra research program. In Studio DöBra, PhD student Max Kleijberg collaborates with a variety of community stakeholders, such as artistic organizations, activity centers for older adults, and organizations for children.

Studio DöBra is an intergenerational initiative where children (9 years old) and older adults (65+ years old) meet to talk about dying, death, and loss. A variety of art forms, such as creating collages, sculptures, drawings, and games, are used to support the intergenerational meetings and conversations about dying, death, and loss. The project aim is to create intergenerational meeting places and stimulate conversations about dying, death, and loss.

Through an action research approach, we explore how community stakeholders can work together to develop Studio DöBra, how the arts can help in intergenerational meetings about dying, death, and loss, how children and older participants experience the project, and what implications the project has for the participants and community organizations. The research project is still ongoing at the time of writing.

Thus far, Studio DöBra was developed and carried out in Skärholmen in 2016 and in Halmstad in 2018. The Studio DöBra Toolbox was developed to inspire others to enable intergenerational conversations about dying, death, and loss, as well as to share our experiences and the knowledge we have generated to date through working with Studio DöBra.

Partners in Skärholmen

Design Lab S, a collective design studio in Skärholmen.
Activity and support centers in Skärholmen for older adults and relatives.
PUNKT127, a library for children and youth in Bredäng.
An after-school center for children in Skärholmen.

Partners in Halmstad

The municipality of Halmstad: Organizations for culture and elder care.
A meeting place for older adults in Halmstad.
An after-school center for children in Halmstad.

Read more about the research project at www.dobra.se/en/projects/studio-dobra/

We also recommend: Bingo-death, a box about life

Design Lab S is a collective design studio for children and older adults, which participated in the research project Studio DöBra. At the request of activity centers for older adults and their relatives in Skärholmen, they have developed a material toolbox with the name Bingo-death, a box about life, based on Studio DöBra. The box includes the exercise Where do we end up after we die? as well as an exercise called Bingodöden (this translates to Bingo-death).

If you want your own copy of the box about life, or if you want to know more about it, contact Alicia Donat Magnin from Design Lab S: alicia@designlabskarholmen.se

The developers of the Studio DöBra Toolbox

From research program DöBra

Max Kleijberg, PhD student at Karolinska Institutet

Max has a design background and as a PhD student is part of the DöBra research program at the Division of Innovative Care Research at Karolinska Institutet. Max initiated collaboration with different stakeholders in Skärholmen to develop Studio DöBra Skärholmen. After this, Halmstad municipality contacted Max to invite him to collaborate with them to develop Studio DöBra Halmstad. Max was part of the project groups in both Skärholmen and Halmstad. He participated in developing the exercises and generated data for his doctoral thesis during this development process and during the intergenerational meetings.



From Skärholmen

Kirsi Sulin, activity coordinator for activity centers for older adults and relatives in Skärholmen

In her role as activity coordinator, Kirsi organizes and leads activities for older adults. In Studio DöBra Skärholmen, Kirsi was responsible for the contact with the older participants. She was also part of the project group that developed the exercises for the intergenerational meetings. In developing Studio DöBra, she made sure that the conditions of the older participants were taken into account in relation to the topics, materials, and places for the meetings.

Samir Alj Fält, artistic director and Alicia Donat Magnin, manager, both from Design Lab S

Design Lab S is a collective design studio that explores contemporary life through processes in which professional designers collaborate with children. After Studio DöBra Skärholmen took place, older adults are also welcome to the design studio. In Studio DöBra Skärholmen, Samir and Alicia were a part of the project group, responsible for inviting children. They also developed the exercises for the intergenerational meetings there. During these meetings, Samir and Alicia led the exercises and provided artistic support for the participants.

From Halmstad

Frida Arvidsson Berglund, art pedagogue at the Department for Culture in Halmstad municipality.

In her role as art pedagogue Frida develops and leads artistic and pedagogical activities at Mjellby Art Museum, Halmstad Konsthall, and in relation to public art in Halmstad. Frida collaborates with other municipal departments as well as external stakeholders. In Studio DöBra Halmstad, Frida participated in starting the project with PhD student Max Kleijberg and representatives from different municipal departments—for culture, elder care, and children and youth. Frida was also part of the project group that developed the project in Halmstad and supported the development of exercises for the intergenerational meetings.

Karolina Oad, activity manager at the Department for Elder Care in the municipality of Halmstad

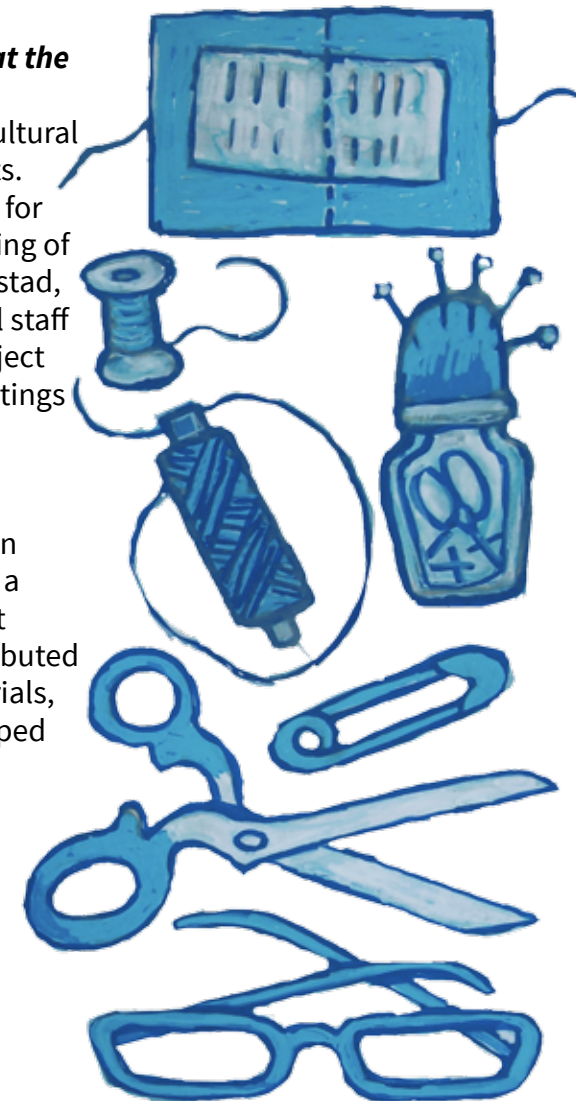
In her role as activity manager, Karolina organizes and leads activities for older adults. In Studio DöBra Halmstad, Karolina was responsible for contact with the older participants and she was a part of the project group that developed the exercises for the intergenerational meetings. In developing Studio DöBra, she made sure that the conditions of the older participants were taken into account in relation to the topics, materials, and places for the meetings.

Charlotte Libäck, culture producer for older adults at the Department for Culture in Halmstad municipality

In her position, Charlotte is responsible for making cultural activities in Halmstad more accessible for older adults. She is also responsible for developing new proposals for cultural activities and is involved in the overall planning of cultural activities in Halmstad. In Studio DöBra Halmstad, Charlotte was responsible for the contact with school staff and artist Hanna Hallén. She was also part of the project group and helped develop the intergenerational meetings and supported the artist in her work.

Hanna Hallén, artist.

Hanna has long experience of working with children in creative projects and has often worked with death as a theme in her own art. Hanna was a part of the project group developing Studio DöBra Halmstad. She contributed ideas for exercises, technical knowledge about materials, provided artistic support for the participants and helped prepare and carry out the exercises.



Acknowledgements

We also want to thank everyone else who has participated in Studio DöBra in Skärholmen and Halmstad.

In Skärholmen, artist Carolina Alvear Bello also worked in the project group with Design Lab S. Childrens' librarian Hanna Bergeå was also part of the project group as a representative for the children- and youth library PUNKT127. Ann-Catrine Hedén was the after-school pedagogue for the participating children.

In Halmstad, Ulrika Andersson provided contact with an after-school center through her role as culture consultant for children and youth at the Department for Children and Youth in Halmstad municipality. Lena Engström, strategist at the Department for Culture, participated in developing Studio DöBra Halmstad. Johanna Ljungberg was the after-school pedagogue for the participating children.

We also thank all the children and older adults who participated in Studio DöBra, as well as the children's parents and guardians. In interviews with PhD student Max Kleijberg, the participants and the children's parents/guardians gave valuable feedback that has helped in developing this toolbox. Thank you for your engagement and all the wonderful meetings.

