

# Beyond Grief: A Case Study Examining Perspectives of Vaccine Hesitancy in Bereaved Parents & Grandparents

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores vaccine hesitancy among parents and grandparents who have tragically lost a child and suspect vaccinations may have played a role in their child's passing. Utilizing a case study approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with a parent and grandparent exhibiting vaccine hesitancy. The narratives, collected through purposive sampling, underwent narrative analysis to uncover insights into experiences, beliefs, and decision-making processes surrounding vaccine aversion in the context of child loss.

## BACKGROUND

Vaccines, a significant 21st-century achievement, play a crucial role in global health by preventing numerous preventable deaths and enhancing immunity against life-threatening diseases. Despite the broader community benefits, some parents hesitate due to concerns about safety, questioning necessity, potential side effects, and harboring distrust in medical institutions. This hesitancy, intensified for those who have lost a child, underscores the complex, emotionally charged nature of the issue, emphasizing the need for nuanced approaches in addressing the personal and societal dimensions of vaccine concerns for effective public health strategies.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to investigate vaccine hesitancy among parents and grandparents who have tragically lost a child due to illness and hold the viewpoint that vaccinations may have played a significant role in their child's passing. The study aimed to gain comprehensive insights into their experiences, beliefs, and decision-making processes regarding their aversion to vaccinations. This was achieved through in-depth interviews with a parent and grandparent who have experienced such a loss and exhibit vaccine hesitancy. The research utilizes a case study approach, employing narrative analysis to identify the structural elements, content, and storytelling aspects within their narratives. The goal is to shed light on the complex issue of vaccine hesitancy in this specific context and its potential public health implications.

## METHODOLOGY & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

**Case Study:** A case study is a qualitative research method that extensively examines a real-life case within its specific context, using detailed data collection methods over time to offer a comprehensive description, identify key themes, and can involve either a single case or multiple cases within a bounded system (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research employed a single-case study, investigating the experiences of a bereaved mother and daughter within the broader context of vaccine hesitancy.

- Interviews
- Online journals
- Material data

**Social Constructivism:** This study utilized social constructivism which is a philosophical approach that posits individuals construct their understanding of the world through personal experiences shaped by social interactions, cultural influences, and historical context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It asserts that meaning is socially constructed through personal experience and cultural context (Crotty, 2015).

## METHODS

**Recruitment:** The study employed purposive sampling to carefully select participants, reaching out to individuals within the researcher's social network through considerate communication to explore their unique insights into vaccine hesitancy following heart-wrenching bereavement.

**Participants:** The participants in this study consisted of a 33-year-old mother who tragically lost her 2-year-old son due to what she believes were complications from the flu vaccine. Additionally, her 56-year-old mother, the child's grandmother, also participated in the study. Both participants reside in the rural Mountain West.

## DATA COLLECTION

**Interview:** Participants were interviewed in one participant's home and via Zoom, utilizing an interview guide for a flexible and comprehensive conversation lasting approximately 60 to 80 minutes, with meticulous recording for thorough analysis.

**Online Journal:** Post-interviews, participants accessed a dedicated online journal via a secure Google document platform, providing an innovative opportunity to contribute overlooked or unprompted information.

**Material Data:** Participants contributed meaningful material data, such as objects representing their departed family member or reflecting their views on vaccinations, providing a profound visual dimension to convey sentiments and experiences beyond verbal expression.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Interview transcripts, online journal entries, and material data underwent meticulous narrative analysis, facilitated by the secure NVivo 14.23.2 (46) software, ensuring systematic and comprehensive data examination.

**Labov's Five Principles of Narrative Analysis,** encompassing abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, and result, provided a structured framework to analyze participant narratives. The abstract served as a preview, orientation established the setting, complicating action formed the core plot, evaluation conveyed emotions, and result provided closure. Additionally, a sixth element, coda, signified the end of the narrative, bringing it back to the present (Andrews et al., 2013).

## RESEARCHER STANCE

As a mother of five grown children, my early motherhood years were marked by significant apprehensions about vaccinations, driven by concerns for my children's well-being. However, evolving in my role as a mother, I came to recognize the importance of vaccinations for public health. Now, as a researcher delving into this study and conversing with participants, I understand how parental concerns can extend beyond mere apprehension, acknowledging the belief in potential harm or even fatality. I emphasize the importance of seeking information from reliable sources to make well-informed decisions about vaccines for oneself and one's family.

## FINDINGS

### Labov's Five Principles

	Themes	References	Sample Excerpt
Abstract Vaccination Hesitancy & Regret	None	2	"He was going in for his two-year-old vaccinations. I had a feeling, and so did my daughter. She knew that he was going to do the flu vaccine. And immediately, I didn't feel right about it; she didn't feel right about it. We discussed it and for the day the day before, and I told her that probably the best thing to do would be to talk to the doctor and tell them your concerns and make your final decision with that. So that's what ended up happening. I did not feel good about it all night, and by the next day, I wanted to tell her to call her before she went in there to tell her not to let them do it because I just didn't feel right about it. Well, when I called her at 10:30 because that's what her appointment was when I remembered (to call) because I was busy at work, she told me that they just did it. They gave him that vaccine."
Complicated Action Medical Crisis & Coping Strategies	3	17	"So I just had a really bad feeling about this flu shot, and I kept telling them, "I think this is the flu shot." And they're like, "No, it's not a live virus." And I'm like, "Well, I don't believe that. I don't believe that."
Orientation Narrative Setting	None	2	"I actually left the room and went to pray for him, and when I came back, the doctors were rushing around him."
Resolution Vaccine Hesitancy Due to Lack of Trust & Information	4	41	"And in the ER, they kept trying to send us home. They just kept telling us it was the flu, too. And I just knew that it wasn't, you know. And so I kept refusing."
			"Well, I am a mother, too. I am married to my husband, Dan. I have three grandbabies, and I have a fourth who is in heaven. So an, I'm also a realtor. And my husband, he is a truck driver slash farmer."
Evaluation Distrust & Skepticism Toward Vaccines	4	22	"And so any vaccine given to them that first year pretty much does no good. It wears off very quickly because they can't form an immune memory. And so, they're given all these vaccines, but yet it's not actually protecting them from that virus."
			"I would pretty much just say that you need to give the parents all the information. If you have studies, legitimate studies, that you performed when you created these vaccines, we want to know them, and what the outcomes there were and what happened, and how well it actually protects against the virus."
			"Mainly because I don't trust what's in the vaccines."
			"Also, there are no trial studies on these vaccines. They say, "Oh, there's limited information on this," but that means there have been zero studies done. So, they're just giving these babies and kids these vaccines with no clinical trials, no studies, no nothing."
			"I mean, when they have different things in it, like mercury, and then they tell you not to eat tuna because of all of mercury, but yet they're shooting them in our kids. No way. I don't agree with that."
			"I always heard bad things about the MMR, and so I was a little concerned about that one. But mainly, I just figured, "Oh, they tell you to vaccinate your kids. We did when we were kids." So, I just never thought about it at all; really, I just did it."
			"I know people that have gotten the serious, serious flu from the flu vaccine. I know so many people. I know people that their kids are autistic today because of it or other serious side effects from them. I know that for a fact."
			"I pretty much turned to God over the whole thing and started seeking him and his comfort, and that was pretty much how I coped."

## MATERIAL DATA

The material data provided in this study offered a depth of understanding of the participants' perspectives on loss and vaccine hesitancy. This touching quote beautifully conveys a lasting connection and enduring remembrance in the face of separation and loss.

"If there ever comes a day when we can't be together, keep me in your heart. I'll stay there forever."  
~Winnie the Pooh



## TAKEAWAYS

### Vaccination Hesitancy & Regret

- The narrative underscores hesitancy and concern about vaccinations, specifically the flu shot for 2-year-old Kale, reflecting pre-existing mistrust or uncertainty within the family.

### Medical Crisis & Coping Strategies

- The family confronted a complex medical crisis as Kale's health declined post-vaccination, with a challenge in accurately diagnosing his condition and a subsequent delay in intervention. The mother's belief in the flu shot's connection to Kale's condition, dismissed by medical professionals, reflects frustration with the medical institution.

### Vaccine Hesitancy Due to Lack of Trust & Information

- The family's experience with Kale's illness intensified their skepticism and distrust in vaccines, expressing reservations about their safety and efficacy for young children. The mother stressed the importance of transparent information for informed vaccination decisions, highlighting a general lack of trust in vaccine research and skepticism towards trials.

### Distrust & Skepticism Toward Vaccines

- There was a general distrust and skepticism towards vaccines, with specific concerns raised about vaccine ingredients, such as mercury. The family's perception of vaccines as potentially harmful, coupled with personal anecdotes of adverse reactions in others, contributed to their hesitancy.

### Spirituality as a Coping Mechanism

- Additionally, spirituality played a significant role as a coping mechanism in dealing with the medical crisis. The family turned to God to provide healing and solace in their greatest time of need.

