

Dedicated to anyone who has ever felt sad  
following the death of someone dear.

# Heart-Shaped PICKLES

S A M P L E



Gentle Grief Support for  
Kids and Grownups

Based on a true story,  
*Heart-Shaped Pickles* is published in  
loving memory of Jenny's grandfathers,  
who died four weeks apart when she  
was five years old.



We hope this booklet will touch your  
heart in gentle ways.

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Giggly. That's how Jenny felt when she played with her grandfathers. She felt all giggly and warm inside.



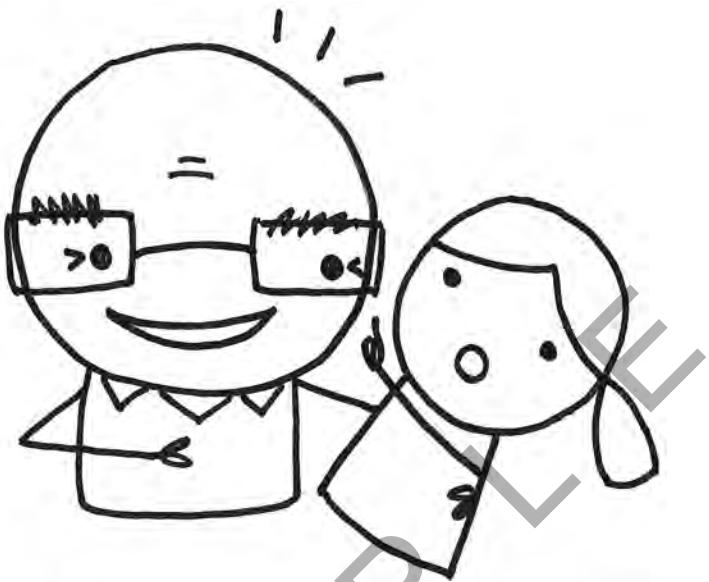
Grampa Dutch would scoop her up into his big, strong arms, and they would play their favorite game: "Find Grampa's Hair."

Grampa Dutch had been bald for many, many years, which is what made this special game so much fun. "Okay, Jenny Lee," Grampa would say, "find Grampa's hair."

Jenny would work hard to make her face look serious, just like a detective trying to solve a big mystery.

"Hmmm...." she would say as she searched every inch of Grampa's smooth head, looking for even one hair!

In the most surprised-sounding voice she could muster, little Jenny would announce, "I found it! Here's Grampa's hair!"



Then her tiny fingers would tickle the hairs of his bushy eyebrows. Grampa's face would light up brighter than the morning sun, and his eyes would shine with love.

Jenny's pigtails would start wiggling from all the giggling.

When Jenny visited Grandpa Wheeler in Canada, they played a different game. "Find Grampa's Hair" was just too boring, because Grandpa Wheeler had a lot of thick, wavy, silver hair.

So they made up their own special giggle game, which they called "Wink, Wink."



Jenny always wanted her grandpa to go first. Grandpa Wheeler would wink in a pattern, and Jenny would try to wink back in the same pattern:

Left eye wink once,  
right eye wink once.

Left eye three times,  
right eye three times.

Right eye once,  
left eye once. Now repeat...



Jenny would start out perfect. But matching wink for wink, sooner or later, she would get confused. Her face would scrunch up on the left side, then on the right side. At last, Jenny would laugh so hard she couldn't wink at all.

Spending time with Grandpa Wheeler and Grampa Dutch was one of her most favorite things to do in the whole wide world.





When Jenny was five years old, both grandfathers got very sick. The doctors and nurses did everything they could to help each of them get well again. But the grandpas had lived a long, long time, and the diseases they battled could not be cured.

Sadly, one day in April, Grampa Dutch died. Only a few weeks later, in early May, Grandpa Wheeler died, too.

Jenny no longer felt giggly at all. She felt very sad. She knew she would never again play "Find Grampa's Hair" with Grampa Dutch or "Wink, Wink" with Grandpa Wheeler.



Jenny felt even worse when she saw how very, very sad her Mom and Dad had become.

Dad usually shared interesting nature and science facts with her. But not now. Mom usually smiled a lot and hummed happy tunes. But not now.

At lunchtime one Saturday, three glum faces sat around the kitchen table. "I miss my grandpas," Jenny said softly.

"So do I, sweetie," Mom whispered, as she gave Jenny's hand a gentle squeeze. Dad didn't say anything, but Jenny saw a tear trickle down his cheek, just below his eyeglasses.

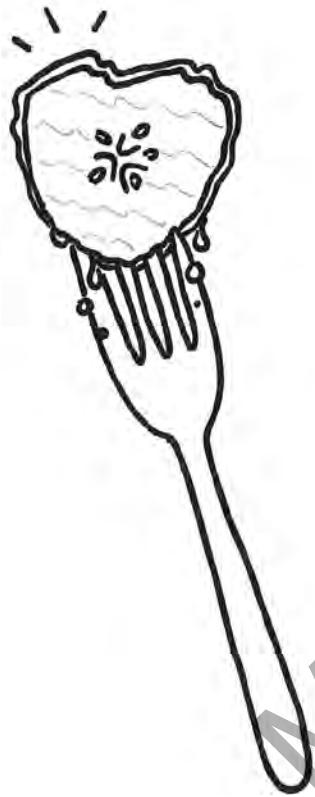
Dad tried to change the subject by passing Jenny the jar of crinkle-cut pickle slices.

"Here, Jenny-Benny," he said in a voice meant to sound upbeat. "Let's have a contest to see who can eat the most pickles."

Mom wrinkled up her nose and mumbled, "Yuck." She didn't like pickles and could never understand how her family could eat a whole jar at one sitting.

As Jenny's fork grabbed the first pickle slice, she let out a giggle. She placed the pickle on her plate and jabbed her fork into the jar once again. Then she let out another giggle.

She held her fork high to show her parents what she had found.



Drip, drip, drip  
went the pickle  
juice onto the  
table. Mom and  
Dad frowned at  
the wet mess.

"Look at this  
cute little heart-  
shaped pickle!"  
Jenny exclaimed,  
twirling the fork  
so she could  
admire the pickle  
from every angle.

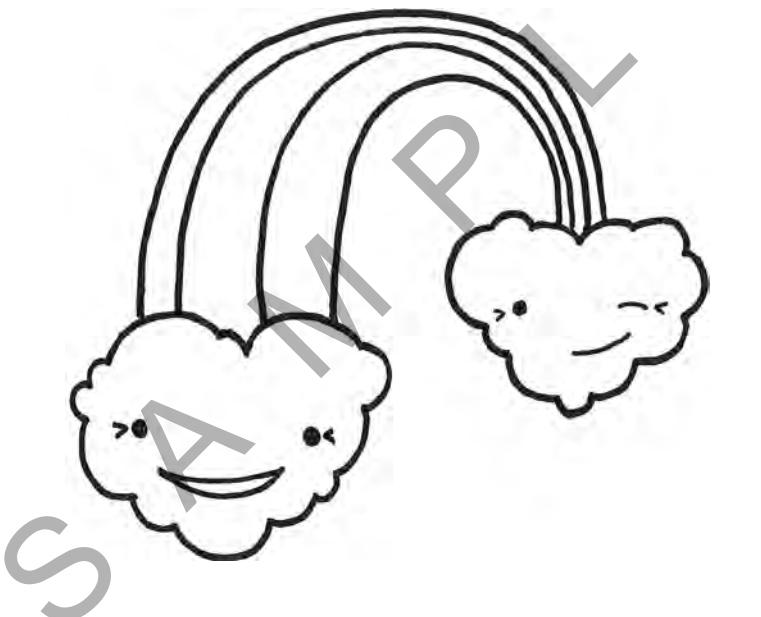
"See? It's in the shape of  
a beautiful heart! I knew it, I  
just knew it!! Now I'm sure my  
grandpas are together, and they  
still love me – and all of us!"

When Jenny got excited, she would start talking non-stop. And now she barely paused to take a breath between sentences as she told her parents about her discoveries.

Ever since her grandfathers died, she'd been seeing hearts everywhere she looked.

While riding on the school bus Monday, Jenny said, she was thinking about her grandpas. The new bus driver was bald just like Grampa Dutch, and he winked at her just like Grandpa Wheeler used to do.

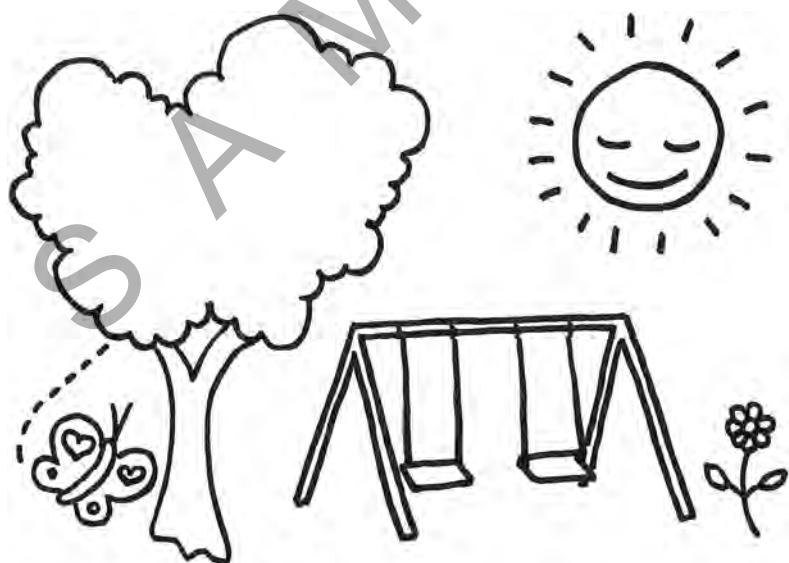
As she gazed out the window of the bus, she saw two fluffy heart-shaped clouds in the sky. They looked so light, so bright, and so free as they slowly floated by.



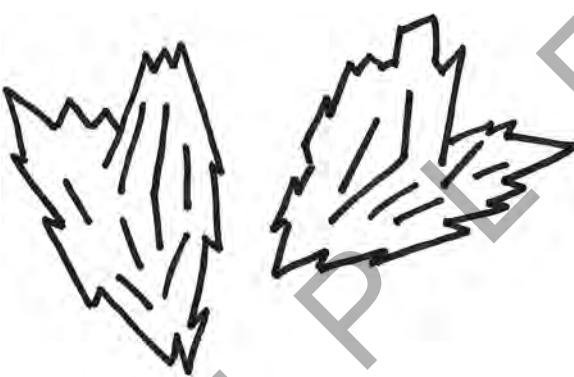
"Seeing those clouds made me feel like Grampa Dutch and Grandpa Wheeler were still with me," Jenny said happily.

Then, during morning recess that same day, Jenny found two heart-shaped pieces of mulch on the playground. "I've been keeping them with me," she added, reaching into her pocket. "Wanna see?"

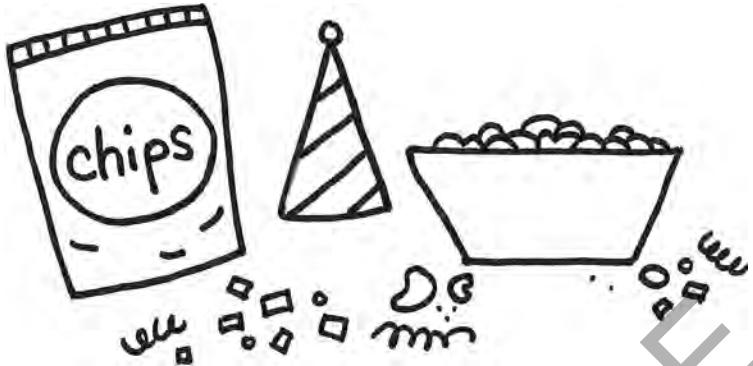
Jenny gently placed two pieces of playground mulch on the table, right next to the drippy pickle spots.



No one spoke. Three pairs of eyes stared at the wood chunks. Jenny took a deep breath and swallowed hard.

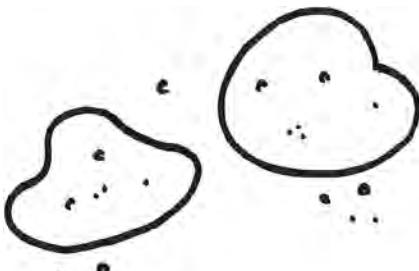


Dad's dark brown eyes had that special softness they got when he was pleased about something. Mom's green eyes were watery, but she was grinning, so Jenny kept on talking a mile a minute. She told her parents about all kinds of heart-shaped things she had found.



For instance, a few days ago at a friend's birthday party, she ate at least fifteen heart-shaped potato chips.

There might have been many more heart-shaped chips in the bowl, Jenny noted, but she lost count when her tummy got full.



Yesterday at the nearby park,  
Jenny romped around in hundreds  
of heart-shaped leaves that had  
fallen from her favorite shade  
tree.





And last night while playing in the bubble bath, she was thrilled to watch how all the teensy bubbles stuck together in blobs that formed really cool heart shapes.

Jenny grinned. "Everywhere I look now I see hearts!"

Her big brown eyes widened.  
"And Mom...Dad...did you see all  
those heart-shaped puddles on  
the driveway this morning when  
we got home from the store?  
There must have been ten or  
eleven of them!"

With that, Jenny ran out the  
front door, calling for Mom and  
Dad to come, too. The three of  
them stood next to their red  
van, looking down at the puddles  
on the concrete.

Jenny began to count. "Yep,  
eleven heart-shaped puddles," she  
confirmed. Mom smiled. Dad smiled.  
And, of course, Jenny smiled, too.



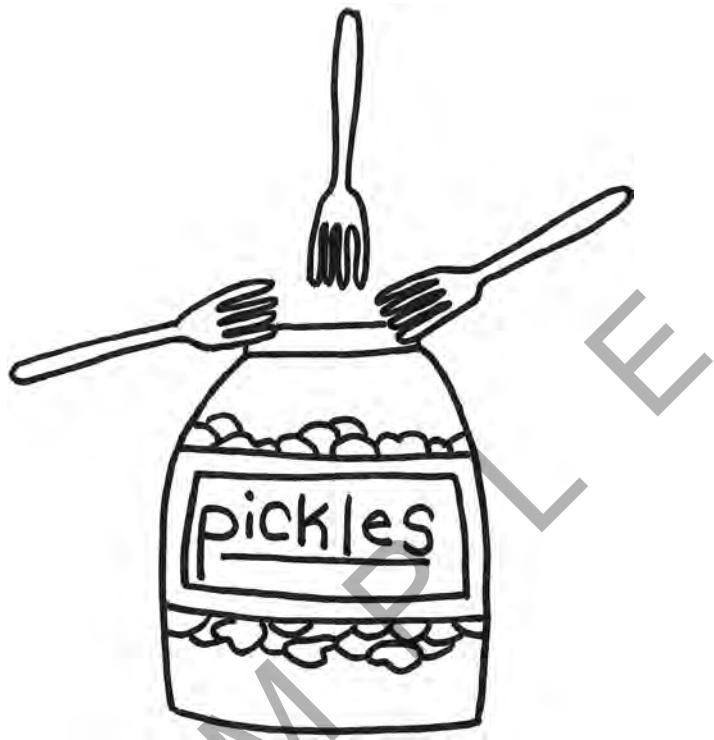
"Let's go finish our lunch," Mom said, humming a happy tune as they walked back into the house.

"Speaking of puddles," Dad said with excitement, "remind me to tell you about the awesome nature show I saw last night on rain forests."

As they sat back in their chairs at the table, Dad added, "But first, how about that pickle-eating contest, Jenny-Benny?"

As Dad reached for the jar of pickles, Mom held out her hand, motioning for Dad to give her the pickles. Dad looked puzzled.

Mom placed the pickle jar smack dab in the center of the table, picked up her fork, and said in her warm, chipper way, "I have a great idea. Let's have a contest to see who can find the most heart-shaped pickles!"



Dad laughed, and as three forks moved toward the open jar, he firmly stated, "Twelve."

Mom asked cheerfully, "Twelve heart-shaped pickles? Is that your final guess, dear?"

"No," Dad replied in his scientific voice. The thumb of his left hand began to scratch his chin, a sure sign that Dad was deep in thought.

"Actually, I was thinking about puddles, not pickles. I'm certain I counted twelve – not eleven – heart-shaped puddles on the driveway just now."

Jenny was the first one to start giggling, then Mom, then Dad. The room glowed with warmth and love as three giggly people sat at the kitchen table, busily counting pickle slices on their plates.

And how many heart-shaped pickles did each of them find?

Well, that's for you to decide!



THE END

S A M



S A M P L E

RESOURCES

for Parents, Teachers, Counselors,  
and Other Grownups

## Discussion Guide

Below are questions to help engage the thoughts and feelings of children after you share this story. Encourage children to color or draw in the booklet, or to use the story to inspire their own creativity. Talking, coloring, drawing, or writing can all be healthy outlets for kids to express their emotions.

**To Start:** This story is about the loss of Jenny's grandpas. Who was your special person who died? On a piece of paper, write or draw something that reminds you of your special person. A "special person" could be a pet, too.

**Pages 1–6:** Jenny loved to play giggle games with her grandpas. Give an example of a favorite game or activity you enjoyed with your special person.

**Pages 7–9:** Jenny's Mom and Dad were so sad after the grandfathers died that they forgot how to smile. Have people around you ever been that sad? In what ways could you remind a sad person that it's normal to be sad, but it's also normal — and important — to laugh and have fun, too?

**Page 12:** The bus driver reminded Jenny of her grandfathers. Reminders of our special person can come in all kinds of ways. What reminds you of your special person?

**Pages 13–20:** When Jenny saw heart-shaped objects, she believed these were signs from her grandpas that their love for her was still very much a part of her life. Give examples of objects, places, or memories that have been meaningful to you.

**Overall:** What are some of the feelings you think Jenny might have had at different times in the story? How about Mom? And Dad?

**Just for Fun:** How many heart-shaped pickles do you think Jenny found? Mom? Dad? If Jenny and her parents were sitting here with you right now, what heart-shaped items do you think they might see?

# 8 Things Kids Can Teach Grownups About Grief

By Karla Wheeler

My husband and I were devastated when our fathers died just four weeks apart. It was our young daughter, Jenny, who helped us to smile again, thanks to her childlike approach to grief. As a hospice volunteer, I often saw times when children brought comfort to others in sweet ways. So I started a list of things kids might be able to teach us about death and loss.

Susan McMahan, PsyD, a retired children's grief counselor, agrees that kids have a natural approach to grief. "As *Heart-Shaped Pickles* shows," Dr. McMahan says, "children grieve in simple, direct ways. Sometimes a childlike approach to the grieving process can help all of us." I am grateful to Dr. McMahan for bringing her professional insights to this booklet. Here are examples of things children can teach grownups about grief:

## 1. No secrets, please!

Sometimes adults forget that young kids grieve, too. If children are old enough to feel love, they are old enough to feel grief. For each of us, the depth of our grief often reflects the depth of our love for the person who died. We should also honor this in our children.

Raised in a death-denying society, adults often muddle through grief. We walk on eggshells and are afraid to talk about death for fear of upsetting others, especially children. Dr. McMahan says it's best to be open with children. "Be honest, brief, clear, and heartfelt," she urges.

"Kids don't try to hide the truth or sugar-coat it, so let's learn from them and keep the lines of communication open." Listen carefully when they share their feelings. Do not interrupt or preach. Let them know that what they're feeling is okay.

## 2. Kiss it & make it better?

Children seem to understand that grief is a process, not an event. Adults might feel pushed by society to try to “fix it” when someone is grieving. But children seem to understand that grief isn’t fixable. They know healing from a loss takes time. We can ease the way for each other one talk at a time, one hug at a time, and one kiss at a time.

## 3. It's not fair!

Feelings of anger and guilt are normal and healthy when grieving. So are tears, and kids seem to show their feelings much more readily than grownups. Dr. McMahan points out, “No feeling is a bad feeling. Even anger is okay if we learn to express it in safe ways.” Crying is good for children and adults, she notes, because “tears let the pain out.” Don’t hide your own tears. Letting children see you cry lets them know it’s okay to cry, too.

## 4. It hurts less when shared.

A child’s impulse is to comfort those who mourn and to accept comfort from others. Kids are natural nurturers and can be more resilient than we know. When children see your grief, they will want to comfort *you*. By the time we’re grown, we’ve often lost touch with that natural process. If you are grieving, let friends know how they can help you in specific ways, both practical and emotional.

## 5. Flowers are nice & ice cream, too!

Rituals can help ease the way, and kids seem to rise above our expected expressions of grief. If placing flowers on a loved one’s gravesite on birthdays is part of your ritual, ask your children what else to do that day to remember the person. They might ask for something non-traditional, like your loved one’s favorite treat for dessert.

## 6. I need my blankie!

Children love their comfort objects. Whether it's a blankie or teddy bear, such items bring a sense of security during stressful times. It's normal for adults to also want to keep a special item nearby. That could be a shirt, ring, book, or other object that helps us feel connected to our loved one. Dr. McMahan says that these "transitional items" can be just as comforting for grownups as for kids.

## 7. Giggles are good.

When adults grieve, a shadow is often cast on all parts of our lives. On the other hand, young children usually grieve in short bursts. They are able to bounce back to their routine of fun and play.

"There are no right or wrong ways to grieve," Dr. McMahan says. Some families might keep the memories of their loved one alive by watching funny home movies. Others might volunteer at the animal shelter, because the person loved pets. Do whatever feels right to your family. But remember that grief doesn't always need to be somber and serious. Let's learn from our kids. Be free to also laugh and have fun in celebration of your loved one's life.

## 8. Simple signs are easy to find.

As this story shows, children are wonderfully open to signs of continued love after someone's death. We grownups often yearn for a sign that our loved one is okay. But are we searching too hard? Perhaps we can learn from children that a sign of continued love might be as simple as a heart-shaped pickle!

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We can help.

If you or someone you know is bereaved, please consider reaching out to the organization that gave you this booklet. Many organizations offer free grief support programs to members of the community, including children's workshops, camps, and support groups.