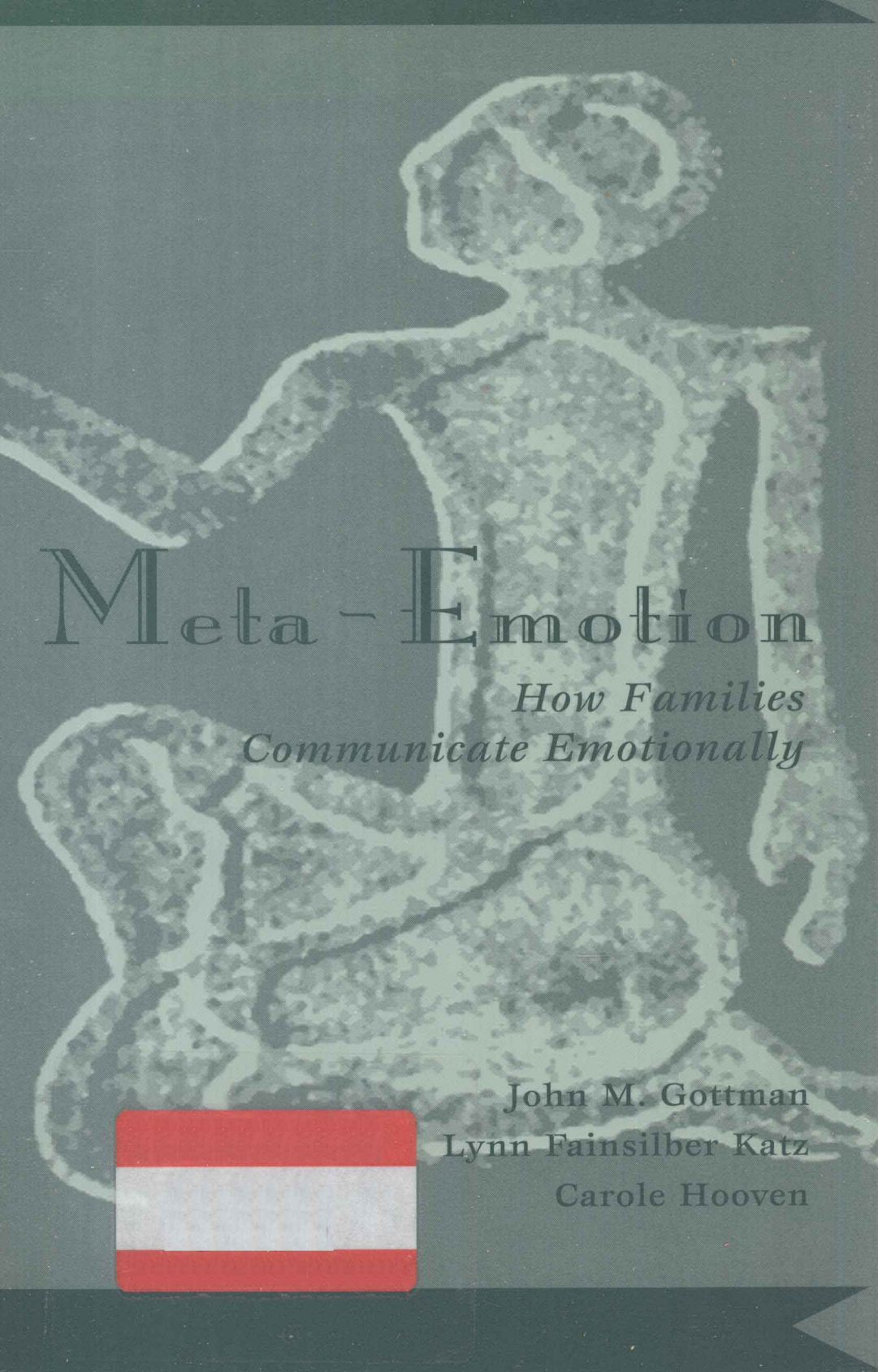

Meta-Emotion

How Families Communicate Emotionally

John M. Gottman
Lynn Fainsilber Katz
Carole Hooven

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by

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Dedicated to the work and to the memory

of

Dr. Haim Ginott

He led the way

since feeling is first
who pays attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world

[...]

then laugh, leaning back in my arms
for life's not a paragraph

and death i think is no parenthesis

Gottman: Where do you think babies come from?
Moriah (daughter, 4 years old): From vaginas.
Gottman: Mommies make them all by themselves?
Moriah: Um hmm.
Gottman: How do they do it?
Moriah: I don't know.
Gottman: Don't you need daddies to make babies?
Moriah: No.
Gottman: Then what are daddies for?
Moriah: To play with, to give love, and to keep their children safe.

Foreword

Haim Ginott, to whom this book is dedicated, was a clinical psychologist, child therapist and parent educator whose books *Between Parent and Child, Between Parent and Teenager*, and *Teacher and Child* revolutionized the way parents and teachers relate to children. The communication skills that he advocates in these books help adults enter into the world of children in a compassionate and caring way and teach them how to become aware and respond to children's feelings. As he said, "I'm a child psychotherapist. I treat disturbed children. Supposing I see a child in therapy one hour a week for a year. Her symptoms disappear; she feels better about herself, gets along with others, even stops fidgeting in school. What is it that I do that helps? I communicate with her in a unique way. I use every opportunity to enhance her feelings about herself. If caring communication can drive sick children sane, its principles and practices belong to parents and teachers. While psychotherapists can cure, only those in daily contact with children can prevent them from needing psychological help."

Most of us are unaware that words are like knives; that we need to be skilled in the use of words. How would Jane feel if the surgeon came into the operating room right before the anesthesiologist put her under and said, "Jane, I really don't have much training in surgery but I love being a surgeon and I use common sense?" Jane would probably panic and run for her life. But there is no exit for children. Unlike a surgeon who is careful where he cuts, parents and teachers use words carelessly. They make many painful incisions until they hit the right spot, heedless of the open wounds they leave behind. They perform daily emotional operations on their children without training.

Were he alive today, Haim Ginott would be most appreciative of the research in this book, which confirms his anecdotal findings. As stated in chapter 5, there is evidence that from the beginning of a child's life, parents' interaction with a child has implications for the child's ability to self-regulate, focus attention, share intersubjective meaning, form the essential affectional bonds with parents and be able to interact with a changing environment. As children develop, the child's developing emotion regulation abilities are directly influenced by parenting and by the way parents talk to children about their emotion.

The book confirms Haim Ginott's findings of the importance of relating to children in an empathic and caring way, as stated in chapter 5: "parenting, which involves being affectionate, enthusiastic, engaged, responsive to the child..." is helpful in healthy development of children. But not many parents know how to relate to children in a "Scaffolding/Praising way." That is where Haim Ginott came in. He tried to teach parents and teachers how to express anger, criticize, praise, acknowledge and reflect feelings, and respond to hurt and disappointment in a way that does not damage a child's emotional well-being. He showed them how to be authoritative without being authoritarian and how to respond rather than react to children' s anger and pain.

He used to say that children need to feel understood, because when they feel understood, they feel loved. By acknowledging their complaints, by accepting all their feelings, be they negative, positive, or ambivalent, and by reflecting their feelings to them, a parent can make a child feel understood and loved. Suppose a child complains by saying, "I hate Grandma. She brought the baby a present but she didn't give me anything." A parent could respond by reflecting the child's complaint and by acknowledging the child's feelings: "Grandma brought a present for the baby but not for you. No wonder you're upset. You think that if she loved you as much as the baby she would have brought you a present too. Why don't you tell her how you feel?"

When Haim Ginott finished *Between Parent and Child,* he offered the book to McGraw-Hill, the firm that had published his *Group Psychotherapy with Children* in 1961. But a young psychologist who was asked to review the book did not think it had anything new to offer and, therefore, it was rejected. He then submitted the book to the Macmillan Publishing Company. The editor at Macmillan was a father of two young children, but he was not interested in Ginott's work. He gave the book to his wife who, while reading it one evening in bed, laughed so appreciatively that the editor became curious. When she told him how helpful the book would be in bringing up their children, he felt compelled to accept the book for publication.

Two years later (1967) a young reporter, Phyllis Feinstein, wrote an article in *The New York Times* Magazine section entitled "Childrenese—A Language for Parents," describing the empathic communication skills that Haim Ginott developed in his book. The producer of the "Today" show was intrigued and invited him to talk about his ideas on the morning program. The response was so overwhelming that he was asked to return 34 times. The sales of the book sky-rocketed; it became a best seller and stayed on the best seller list for more than a year. Eventually the book was translated into 30 languages, including Chinese, and has sold more than 3 million copies. When *Between Parent and Teenager* was published in 1969, it, too, became a best seller. In 1972 Ginott published *Teacher and Child.* In 1973 he died of cancer at age 51.

It was gratifying to watch the warm response young parents, especially mothers, gave to learning the communication skills that would help them respond empathically to their children, skills that Haim Ginott advocated in his books. They welcomed the idea that finding it difficult to bring up children and not always knowing what to say and do did not mean that they needed psychological help in

order to become more caring and effective parents. At that time, most psychologists felt that poor parenting was the result of parents' psychological problems rather than lack of skill, misinformation, or poor parental models.

Often when parents brought *Between Parent and Child* to their psychotherapists, the psychotherapists would denigrate it by calling it a cookbook that they should not need for bringing up their children, that it was contrived and manipulative. They encouraged parents to be spontaneous, to listen to their instincts, to be natural. Unfortunately, most parents could not distinguish impulsivity from spontaneity. They did not know how to examine their natural reactions to their children, to separate that which helps from that which can hurt, and their therapists did not know how to help.

As chief psychologist at the Jacksonville, Florida Child Guidance Clinic, Haim Ginott treated emotionally disturbed children and adolescents. This intensive experience with troubled children sensitized him to children's emotional needs and to the needs of their parents. He came to realize that the traditional model of offering psychological treatment to these parents may help them personally but did not necessarily teach them how to relate to their children in a more compassionate way. Thus, in the early 1950s, he began experimenting with parent education and guidance groups as an alternative to psychotherapy for parents. Eventually, he expanded his parent guidance groups to include parents of healthy children who wanted to learn how to be more caring and effective with their children, to become aware of how they felt about their own feelings and thus become more understanding of their children's anger and hurt.

Before he became a psychologist, Haim Ginott was an elementary school teacher in Israel. He was a graduate of the David Yellin Teachers College in Jerusalem. But after teaching for a few years he realized that he was not sufficiently prepared to deal with "live" children in the classroom. As he would say: "I tried to teach them to be polite and they were rude; to be neat and they were messy; to be cooperative and they were disruptive." It was then that he decided to come to the United States, to Columbia University Teacher's College, but Columbia's education courses were not helpful either. Like most teachers, he knew that he came to the profession with the best of intentions, to function in the classroom humanely as well as effectively. He wanted to learn how to discipline without humiliating; how to criticize without destroying self-worth; how to praise without judging; how to express anger without hurting; how to acknowledge feeling, not argue against it; how to respond so that children would learn to trust their inner reality and develop self-confidence.

Haim Ginott's early experience as a teacher left him with an appreciation of the problems that confront the well-intentioned adults who interact with children. It influenced his development as a parent counselor and child therapist. He became aware of the importance of empathy, not only for the child but also for the adult, and the latter's need for practical help.

His development as a clinical psychologist and child therapist was influenced by his teacher, Virginia Axline, who had been a student of Carl Rogers. As a graduate student assistant to Axline he learned the Rogerian technique of how to communicate empathy by acknowledging and reflecting feelings. It was a skill that he used

with children who were in treatment with him, and he also taught this skill to parents. Acknowledging and reflecting feelings was the primary tool that both Axline and Rogers used in treating children and adults. But Haim Ginott realized soon after he started treating disturbed children that he needed to develop a more varied set of tools for communicating with his young patients. The children would get angry and he had to respond to their anger; he got angry and he had to learn how to express his anger; how to criticize, praise, and say no without inflicting hurt or doing damage to the child's emotional well-being. As a result he experimented until he came up with specific communication skills that he found therapeutic in treating disturbed children, which he shared in his books with parents and teachers.

The philosophy that guided him was part of the Hippocratic Oath: At first: Do no damage, and the dictum: Deal with the situation, not the person. When things go wrong, do not blame the person but look for a solution. State the problem and the possible solution. "Ohhh ...the vase broke. We need to pick up the pieces." Not: "You're so clumsy! Look what you did! How am I going to replace this expensive vase? You're like a bull in a china shop!" Neither response will bring back the beautiful vase, but by concentrating on the mishap and not on the perpetrator, the parent has protected the child from feeling guilty and from developing an image of himself as being clumsy.

Parents, Haim Ginott felt, need to discard their language of rejection and learn a language of acceptance. They even know the words. They heard their parents use them with guests and strangers. It was a language that was protective of feelings, not critical of behavior. When a guest accidentally breaks a valuable object, rarely do parents say anything negative directly to the guest. Just the opposite. They make sure that the guest does not feel bad about the accident; they reassure the guest: "It's all right. I know exactly where to get another one like it." Haim Ginott tried to encourage parents and teachers to treat children as guests; to be as aware as they are of hurting their guests' feelings when they respond to children.

But many parents and teachers were confused when they listened to Haim Ginott or read his books. They could not decide whether he was strict or permissive. They were concerned that if they started to relate to children in a caring way they would have to sacrifice setting limits and setting standards, that the children would become undisciplined.

Haim Ginott was both strict and permissive. He was strict when it came to behavior. There was acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Parents and teachers had to decide for themselves what behavior they would or would not tolerate. But he was permissive when it came to feeling, because neither children nor adults can help how they feel. He used to say: "Birds fly, fish swim and people feel." That is how we are. It is therefore not in anyone's best interest to make children feel uncomfortable or, even more serious, guilty for the way they feel.

"What is the goal of parenting?" he would ask. "When all is said and done, we want children to grow up to be decent human beings, a person with compassion, commitment and caring."

How, then, does one go about humanizing a child? Only by using humane methods. By recognizing that the process is the method, that the ends do not justify

the means and that in our attempt to get children to behave in a way that is acceptable to us we do not damage them emotionally.

Over the years many parents and teachers studied with Haim Ginott. They contributed to his understanding, providing many of the anecdotes in his books that illustrate his principles of communication. They, on the other hand, benefited from his wisdom, his warmth, and his humor. Although English was not his native tongue, he loved the English language. He loved it as a poet, using it sparingly and with precision. Raised in a verbal Jewish tradition, Haim Ginott often made his points through jokes, parables, and anecdotes. He was in great demand as a speaker where his message, expressed with caring, humor, and enthusiasm, easily seduced his audience.

A story is told about a rabbi who died at the age of forty-nine. When the family returned from the funeral the eldest son said: "Our father had a long life." Everyone was aghast. "How can you say that of a man who died so young?" The son responded: "Because his life was full; he wrote many important books and he touched many lives."

That is my consolation.

Alice Ginott

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