

[What Every Girl Should Know \(1916\), by Margaret Sanger](#) ^[1]

By: Malladi, Lakshmeeramya

What Every Girl Should Know was published in 1916 in New York City, New York, as a compilation of articles written by Margaret Sanger from 1912 to 1913. The original articles appeared in the newspaper *New York Call*, under the title “*What Every Girl Should Know*.” The articles, which are organized into chapters and individual parts in the book, describe sex education, human reproduction, and sexually transmitted infections. Sanger, a nurse and social activist, published *What Every Girl Should Know* during a time in which US federal and state obscenity laws regulated the circulation of literature related to sex. *What Every Girl Should Know* flouted those laws, helping people learn about sex education and reproductive health in the US during the early twentieth century.

Margaret Sanger, a nurse and social reformer, began writing articles on reproductive health, sex education, and hygiene for the women’s section of the newspaper *New York Call* in 1911. During the early 1900s, ideas of morality hindered open discussions about sex education and reproductive health in the US. Sanger’s earlier series of articles, titled “What Every Mother Should Know,” or “How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth,” informed parents on how to teach sex education to their children. After receiving positive feedback on her articles, the newspaper asked Sanger to write more articles, including some aimed at girls.

In 1912, Sanger started writing a series of articles, “What Every Girl Should Know.” The *New York Call* published the twelve-part series between 17 November 1912 and 2 March 1913. The articles explained sensitive topics related to sex, reproduction, and sexually transmitted infections.

In 1916, Max Maisel, a publisher and owner of a bookstore in New York City, New York, published Sanger’s “What Every Girl Should Know” series in a book titled *New York Call*.

Sanger divided *What Every Girl Should Know* into seven chapters and a conclusion section. All the chapters, except the first and seventh chapters, are separated into two or three parts. In chapter one, “Introduction,” Sanger discusses the importance of educating girls about the truth of sex and reproduction. She argues that there is a need for healthier discussions about topics related to sex, as lacking that knowledge results in unclean living. Sanger states that mothers have a responsibility to teach sex education impartially to their children because children come to them first with questions. Sanger concludes that her goal is to present facts and is not to impose her morals or beliefs on her readers.

In chapter two, “Girlhood,” Sanger discusses both physical and mental aspects of sexual health in two parts. She begins the first part, “Physical Growth,” with a definition of the adolescent period. Sanger defines it as occurring from ages twelve to twenty-two and being the time when girls physically, mentally, and morally develop. She states that strong relationships between mothers and daughters during adolescence are important. Sanger details several changes that adolescent girls undergo during what she calls the passage from childhood to womanhood. Those changes include changes in height, circulation of blood, facial blemishes, and the nervous system. Sanger states that the changes influence adolescent girls to be ungainly, self-conscious of their height, susceptible to spine curvature from poor posture, prone to circulatory disturbances, have pimples, or exhibit nervousness through habits such as stuttering.

In part two of chapter two, “Mental Development,” Sanger describes certain senses that are heightened in adolescent girls. Those enhanced senses include smell, color, hearing, and observation of surroundings. Sanger says that those changes lead to behaviors such as an increased affinity for perfumes, selecting clothing, trinkets, dancing, music, or singing. She also discusses emotional changes that adolescent girls undergo, such as religious awakening or devotion to friends. Sanger concludes the section with the observation that during adolescence, girls become more aware of boys and develop a consciousness of sex.

In chapter three, “Puberty,” Sanger describes “General Organs, Uterus, Ovaries, Etc.” and “Menstruation and Its Disorders.” In the first part of the chapter, Sanger defines puberty as being the age when individuals are capable of [procreation](#) ^[2]. She argues that understanding that period of development is important to the health and wellbeing of girls. Sanger states that individuals should know the reproductive organs to help them better understand puberty. In addition, she notes that public schools do not educate adolescents about their reproductive organs. For that reason, Sanger defines the function and anatomical structure of each of the [female reproductive organs](#) ^[3]. For example, she describes the ovaries as storing ovules, or eggs, and states that the [uterus](#) ^[4], or [womb](#) ^[5], is the site of [fertilization](#) ^[6] of the eggs. In the second part, Sanger describes [ovulation](#) ^[7] and [menstruation](#) ^[8]. She defines [ovulation](#) ^[7] as the expulsion of an [egg](#) ^[9] from the [ovary](#) ^[10] every twenty-eight days. Sanger states that [menstruation](#) ^[8] occurs when the [egg](#) ^[9] is not fertilized by [sperm](#) ^[11], and the contents of the [uterus](#) ^[4] are discharged in menstrual flow.

In chapter four, "Sexual Impulse," Sanger describes the emotions that she characterizes as influencing sexual behavior. The first part is titled "Masturbation," and the second part is titled "Sexual Impulse in Animals – In Men. Its Significance in Love." In the first part, Sanger states that adolescents experience two types of sexual impulses, the desire to interact with someone of the opposite gender and the desire to masturbate. Sanger characterizes masturbation as a disease and argues that it hinders development during adolescence. She says that masturbation is an unhealthy sexual impulse in comparison to the sexual impulse that contributes to individuals being attracted to each other.

In the second part of chapter four, Sanger emphasizes that there is a difference between sexual impulse and love. She argues that emotions such as respect, shared tastes, and mutual purposes are important for love. Sanger says that instead of selecting men that they are sexually compatible with, women select men that can financially support them. She notes that once women attain economic freedom, they will assert themselves and choose spouses based on different criteria. Sanger ends chapter four by arguing that individuals struggle to differentiate sexual impulse and love. She emphasizes that girls should control their sexual impulses until they feel emotions such as respect and confidence for another individual as that will lead to passion that is strong, pure, and sacred in adulthood.

Sanger divides chapter five, "Reproduction," into two parts. In part one, "Growth of the Life Cell in the Uterus," Sanger explains that the best way to teach children about reproduction is to first describe reproduction in other forms of life, such as flowers or animals, before describing human reproduction. She emphasizes that method will prepare children to understand the complexity of human reproduction. Sanger begins her explanation of human reproduction with the merging of two [germ cells](#)^[12] and ends with a description of the growth and development of a human embryo. She argues that information about the process of reproduction is important to understand.

In part two, "Hygiene of Pregnancy – Miscarriage," Sanger defines both [abortion](#)^[13] and [miscarriage](#)^[14] as occurring before the embryo can survive outside the [uterus](#)^[4]. She lists the causes of [abortion](#)^[13] as including falls, shock, overexertion, fatigue, and lifting heavy objects. Sanger states that the consequences of [abortion](#)^[13] include excessive blood loss or an inability to carry future pregnancies. She then discusses side effects of [pregnancy](#)^[15], such as morning sickness, and she proposes habits that pregnant women should follow. Those habits include wearing comfortable maternity dresses, maintaining simple diets, exercising, and avoiding fatigue. Sanger emphasizes that understanding [pregnancy](#)^[15] contributes to improving the well-being of women.

Sanger discusses sexually infected disease in chapter six, "Some of the Consequences of Ignorance and Silence." The chapter is divided into three parts: "Continence in Young Men," "Gonorrhoea," and "Syphilis." In part one, Sanger states that parents of adolescent boys incorrectly believe that boys who do not engage in intercourse by puberty will have poor health. According to that misconception, when males don't use their sex organs, those organs lose their function. Sanger attributes a high rate of sexually transmitted infections to the early sexual behavior of adolescents, a reason adolescents need to be informed about those diseases.

In part two of chapter six, Sanger acknowledges that gonorrhoea and syphilis are the two most commonly known sexually transmitted infections. She defines gonorrhoea as inflammation of the urethra that causes pain during urination and discharge. Sanger states that the disease is caused by infection from a microbe called gonococcus. She describes the symptoms of the illness, the need to see a physician for treatment, and the ways in which the disease can spread.

In the following part, Sanger defines syphilis as an infectious disease that is caused by a distinct microbe. She describes the various stages after infection with syphilis, from the appearance of an ulcer in the groin during stage one to the damage of the nervous system in stage three. Sanger also compares syphilis and gonorrhoea. She states that syphilis is detected later, can be hereditary, and can be contagious from non-sexual actions, such as sharing utensils. Sanger argues that individuals should be educated about sexually transmitted infections to avoid spreading the illnesses and suffering the consequences of the diseases.

In the final chapter, "Menopause or Change of Life," Sanger describes the process by which [menstruation](#)^[8] and child-bearing ability halts. She states that change in ovaries causes [ovulation](#)^[7] to stop releasing eggs. Sanger describes symptoms of menopause, including headaches, sleeplessness, and sweating. She urges women experiencing menopausal symptoms to seek treatment from a gynecologist. In the conclusion section, Sanger argues that women need to realize that womanhood means more than becoming what she calls a child-bearing machine. She notes that women are beginning to see that motherhood is one role in life and not their only role.

The content of Sanger's book conflicted with the restraints of the Comstock Act, an 1873 federal law that restricted the distribution of obscene materials through the US Postal Services. In 1913, [Anthony Comstock](#)^[16], author of the Comstock Act and a special agent of the Post Office Department, flagged one of Sanger's articles as violating the law. As a special agent of the US Post Office Department, Comstock had the authority to open all mail and determine whether the contents were obscene. The Post Office Department notified the *New York Call* that Sanger's article on gonorrhoea, reflected in part two of chapter six in *What Every Girl Should Know*, violated the Comstock Act by containing the words gonorrhoea and syphilis. The Post Office Department warned the newspaper that their mailing privileges would be revoked if they published another indecent article. On 9 February 1913, the *New York Call* published a mostly blank page. Instead of Sanger's article on syphilis, reflected in part three of chapter six in *What Every Girl Should Know*, Sanger's column contained the words: "Nothing! By order of the Post Office Department." However, the Post Office Department allowed the publication of the article several months later after many complaints from

readers.

Further conflict occurred in 1916 when [birth control](#)^[17] advocate Fania Mindell was charged with violating section 1142 of the New York State Penal Code by distributing *What Every Girl Should Know*. Supplementing the federal Comstock Act, the New York law restricted the sale, advertisement, or distribution of contraceptives. Mindell distributed the book at a [birth control](#)^[17] clinic in Brownsville, New York. Mindell had helped establish the clinic with Sanger and Sanger's sister, Ethel Byrne, in October 1916. On 2 February 1917, the Mindell was fined fifty dollars instead of a jail sentence because the book did not contain specific information on contraceptives. However, in November 1917, the New York State Court of Appeals in Albany overturned Mindell's ruling.

What Every Girl Should Know challenged state and federal obscenity laws regulating the publication of literature on sex education. In addition, it contributed to broader knowledge about sex education and reproductive health.

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