

[What Every Mother Should Know \(1914\), by Margaret Sanger](#) ^[1]

By: Malladi, Lakshmeeramya

What Every Mother Should Know was published in 1914 in New York City, New York, as a compilation of newspaper articles written by Margaret Sanger in 1911. The series of articles informed parents about how to teach their children about reproduction and it appeared in the newspaper *New York Call*. In 1911, the newspaper series was published as a book, with several subsequent editions appearing later. In *What Every Mother Should Know*, Sanger emphasizes starting education on reproduction early and honestly answering children's questions. The book acted as a resource for parents and urged readers to be less fearful of approaching the topic with their children. *What Every Mother Should Know* provided information to the public about sex education and reproductive health, which was scarce during the early twentieth century.

In 1911, Anita Block, editor of the newspaper the *New York Call*, invited Sanger, a nurse, to give a lecture at a meeting for the Socialist Party, a political [organization](#) ^[2] in New York City, New York. There, Sanger spoke about health to a crowd of ten people. The lecture was so well received that Block invited Sanger to give another health lecture, which attracted a crowd of seventy-five people. Women in the audience had many questions for Sanger about reproductive health due to the scarcity of such material in the US during the early twentieth century due partly to the Comstock Act. In 1873, US Congress in Washington, D.C., had passed a federal anti-obscenity law, commonly called the Comstock Act, which limited the distribution of allegedly obscene materials, including information related to sex education or reproductive health. During Sanger's interactions with patients, many of whom were immigrant women, Sanger recorded that many women did not have adequate knowledge about reproductive health or hygiene.

To address the discrepancies in knowledge, Sanger began writing articles about reproductive health for the women's section of the *New York Call* in 1911. The *New York Call* published the first series of articles written by Sanger, "What Every Mother Should Know, or How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth," over a period of several months. The series of articles describes how mothers could teach their children about sex. The series was soon published in book form in New York City. Several subsequent editions of the book were later published.

In 1914, the Rabelais Press in New Bowery, New York, published the second edition of *What Every Mother Should Know*. The book contains an introduction and eight chapters. In the introduction, Sanger justifies her reasons for writing the articles by stating that parents are often unsure of how to approach sex education, an important topic of discussion. In the first two chapters, Sanger discusses reproduction in flowers. Sanger describes the reproduction of frogs in the third chapter. In the fourth and fifth chapters, Sanger characterizes reproduction in [birds](#) ^[3]. In the sixth chapter, she discusses reproduction in mammals. The seventh chapter encompasses human development. The eighth, and final chapter, is the conclusion of the book, in which Sanger provides some final advice to parents about teaching their children about sex and reproduction. Throughout the book, Sanger mentions a boy named Bobby and his mother, discussing how Bobby's mother teaches him and five other friends about sex education.

In the introduction, Sanger states that the topic of sex education is one of the most important topics for parents to discuss with their children. She says that despite its importance, most parents and teachers do not discuss reproductive health with children. Sanger notes that when children begin asking their parents questions about how they came to be alive, they are either ignored or lied to. She advises parents to start teaching their children about reproduction at four years of age. Sanger states that *What Every Mother Should Know* is written for parents who would like to teach their children about reproduction, but are unsure of how to do so. She notes that parents should introduce the topic of reproduction gradually. First, they should teach children about reproduction in flowers. Several months later, they should begin educating children about reproduction in animals such as [fish](#) ^[4] or frogs. During the next year, parents should focus on reproduction in [birds](#) ^[3]. Sanger notes that by six years of age, children should be ready to learn about reproduction in mammals and [humans](#) ^[5].

Sanger discusses the parts of a flower involved in reproduction in the first chapter, "Mr. and Mrs. Buttercup, Their Home and Families." In that chapter, Sanger describes a child, five-year-old Bobby, and his mother. Bobby is asking his mother where he came from. After deciding to teach Bobby about reproduction, Bobby's mother gathers five other children from the neighborhood to join her lesson. She takes the children into the woods, where they find a buttercup flower to analyze. Bobby's mother identifies the flower's pistil and stamen as being its reproductive organs. She refers to the pistil and stamen of the flower as the mother and

father, respectively. Bobby's mother states that the stamen contains pollen, which then combines with seeds within the pistil, resulting in the mating of the mother and father parts of the flower. Sanger also includes two drawings. The first is a depiction of a flower with all of its parts labeled, and the second is a drawing of the pistil, displaying its ovules, or seeds.

In chapter two, "The Flowers," Sanger continues describing reproduction in flowers. She states that a flower's pollen cannot travel to the flower's seeds on its own. Instead, the bright color and nectar of flowers attract [insects](#)^[6] and other small animals. Pollen from the stamen attaches to the legs or head of the insect or animal and is then transferred to the top of the pistil, or stigma. The pollen then travels down a tube in the stigma and interacts with the seeds in the pistil, a process called [fertilization](#)^[7]. Sanger also discusses the role that the wind, [insects](#)^[6], and small animals play in dispersing fertilized seeds so that they can grow.

In the third chapter, "The Toads and Frogs," Sanger describes reproduction in toads and frogs. Bobby's mother and the six boys build a [frog](#)^[8] habitat in the beginning of the chapter. They catch frogs from a pond and bring them to the newly created habitat to observe them. Sanger states that female toads and female frogs have a group of eggs inside their body. The eggs are expelled outside the body when the female toad or [frog](#)^[8] experiences a desire to mate. The male toad or [frog](#)^[8] fertilizes the eggs by covering them in what Sanger calls life-giving fluid. Those fertilized eggs then become tadpoles. Sanger emphasizes that unlike flowers, most animals search for mates. She ends the chapter by noting that frogs and toads do not feel any affection or emotion when finding a mate. The impulse to reproduce drives their actions.

Chapter four, "Part I. The Birds and Their Families," starts a discussion about reproduction in [birds](#)^[3] that Sanger continues in chapter five, "The Birds and Their Families." In chapter four, Bobby's mother points out a female bird, or mother bird, to the children and states that like a flower, a female bird also has an [ovary](#)^[9] that contains eggs. Bobby's mother notes that a male bird, or father bird, produces a fertilizing substance. During the mating season, the father bird orients himself so that the fertilizing substance can enter the mother bird's body and cover the eggs. Once the eggs have been fertilized, they move out of the female bird's body as she lays them. In the process, the eggs accumulate a nutritious substance and are encased in a shell. Finally, the eggs fall into a nest created by the mother and father [birds](#)^[3].

Continuing her discussion of [birds](#)^[3] in chapter five, Sanger describes the role of the male bird in watching over the nest. She emphasizes how the father bird protects the newly hatched [birds](#)^[3]. Sanger ends the chapter by encouraging parents to teach their children that love and affection are appropriate feelings. She characterizes love and affection as beautiful.

In chapter six, "The Mammals and Their Children," Sanger defines a [mammal](#)^[10] as an animal that is covered in hair, breathes with lungs, has warm blood, and nurses its children with milk produced in mammary glands. Sanger then introduces [humans](#)^[5] as a type of [mammal](#)^[10] and describes their reproduction. She says that only one [egg](#)^[11] at a time is fertilized in a female human, and that it remains in the [uterus](#)^[12]. She briefly states that after nine months a baby is born.

After describing reproduction in [humans](#)^[5], Sanger describes how [humans](#)^[5] are only one part of nature in chapter seven, "Man's Development." She states that [humans](#)^[5], in addition to plants, frogs, [birds](#)^[3], and mammals, are a part of nature, and she says that [humans](#)^[5] are the most complex animals. In that chapter, Sanger notes how Bobby's mother showed the children diagrams of the male and female body and taught them about the reproductive organs. Sanger concludes the chapter by emphasizing that children should receive sex education from their parents and not from other children. She states that mothers should have an appropriate attitude towards reproduction and should be able to talk to their children in an understandable way.

Sanger concludes the pamphlet with the eighth chapter of *What Every Mother Should Know*. She emphasizes that parents often lie or ignore their children when they are asked about sex. Sanger says that when parents ignore their children's questions, the children ask their friends for information, often leading them to obtain incorrect or inappropriate information. She advises parents to provide children with information that is appropriate to their age. Sanger emphasizes that parents should start educating children when they are young. She notes that slowly introducing children to the topic of reproduction will enable them to be confident and have secure views of manhood and womanhood.

Sanger's series of articles about sex education were so popular that Block, the editor of the *New York Call*, invited Sanger to continue writing articles for the newspaper. Sanger wrote a subsequent series of articles, "What Every Girl Should Know," to provide reproductive health information for adolescent girls.

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