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

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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 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. 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 or frogs. During the next year, parents should focus on reproduction in birds. Sanger notes that by six years of age, children should be ready to learn about reproduction in mammals and humans. 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
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.

Sources

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