

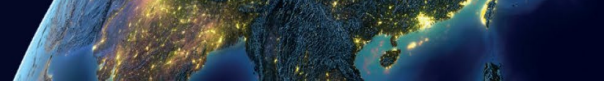
Volume 2: Chapter 10

Source 10.2

Margaret Sanger, “No Healthy Race Without Birth Control” (1921)

Margaret Sanger (1879-1966) was a nurse, educator, and activist in New York, who led the movement for education and access to birth control for women. Sanger was the daughter of Irish immigrants, and she witnessed the difficulties her mother faced from her eighteen pregnancies, including seven miscarriages. As a nurse, she worked with poor communities on the Lower East Side in New York City. In the 1910s birth control was illegal in the United States, so Sanger traveled to Europe to study modern birth control methods. In 1916, she opened the first birth control clinic in the United States, in Brooklyn. She was arrested many times and the clinic in Brooklyn was shut down because of US laws that prohibited people from sharing information about birth control. In 1921, Sanger formed the American Birth Control League, which was the basis for the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, a non-profit organization aimed at providing education and reproductive health services.

Sanger was involved in left-wing progressive causes and also was a supporter of eugenics movement, an ideology that categorized certain groups and individuals as racially and socially “fit,” and believed that those groups should be encouraged to procreate and increase their population, while other “unfit” peoples should not reproduce. The eugenics movement promoted racist and ablest ideas of which groups and individuals were fit to reproduce. After World War I, the US government suppressed leftist movements, and Sanger became more involved with eugenicists and white supremacists. However, she also worked with African American activists including W.E.B. DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Adam Clayton Powell. In the 1930s, with support from African American community and church leaders, she opened a clinic in Harlem.

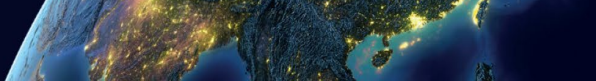


Our girls must be brought up to realize that Motherhood is the most sacred profession in the world, and that it is a profession that requires more preparation than any other open to women. This preparation must be begun in infancy; but unlike much of the dull routine of what passes for preliminary education' to-day, the prerequisites' for motherhood should be made, and luckily for us, are being made more and more interesting for girls and young women. The first requisite is, of course, sound healthy bodies -- and incidentally sound healthy minds -- built up by play and sport and work of the right kind.

One of the most encouraging signs to-day is that more and more girls and women are entering into sports that build up strong bodies -- swimming, diving, skating, tennis and many others -- and that the old ideals and fashions of the all-too-ladylike are disappearing. The old-time fashion of fainting or swooning we read about in the novels of the nineteenth century is dead. The wasp' waist is gone; and if the corset has not completely gone, it is going rapidly, with the long skirts that hampered the limbs, and the high heels that make walking a caricature. Once freed of these silly impediments women can never again give up their freedom. And if these styles are fatal to the flaws of obesity and thinness, those defects will somehow also disappear.

I place this stress upon healthy bodies for the future mothers of the race, because I am firmly convinced that strong healthy women will not choose as the fathers of their children puny, anemic men; and thus if our girls become more and more gloriously healthy, the boys will likewise have to be. The day is passing when any puny, under-developed male can choose the mother of his children.' The new, strong young woman will only be attracted to the physically fit young man. In this matter, we may trust the girl more than the young man.

Beauty is no longer skin deep. Nothing could be more false than that silly adage. Beauty, as we are more and more coming to recognize, is not a matter of a pair of blue eyes



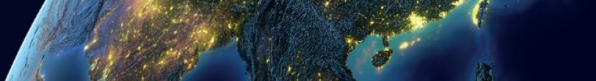
or brown, of Mary Pickford curls, or a skilfully imposed mask of make-up. Beauty is bone deep. Beauty is health and strength and soundness of limb and body. Take care of the body and the complexion will take care of itself. Develop your body and beauty, the real beauty, not the conventional and artificial, will inevitably result.

The well-developed, strong, healthy body is the first requisite for motherhood. And that includes brain development, intelligence and spirituality as well. These latter qualities are needed in the choosing of the husband. But once these problems are satisfactorily solved, the young woman may yet be unprepared for motherhood. If she has been a working woman, she will probably need rest and relaxation before undertaking the supreme task of maternity. Modern life, especially modern city life, is becoming more and more complex. Living conditions are difficult. New homes are hard to find; they are moreover expensive.

Under such conditions, while it may be most advisable for the young couple to marry, it may be financially impossible or impractical to bring children into the world the first years of marriage. This is especially true of city dwellers, where high rents and the high cost of living must first be met and mastered. Birth control, in one form or another, is then the most practical solution of this difficulty, and intelligent and irreproachable young married people are, more and more, in the interest of their children and the proper spacing' of their families, becoming adherents of this doctrine.

Even after marriage many young women nowadays are continuing their professional or business careers because they wish to share the burden of homemaking with their husbands, and because they are no longer content to be mere household drudges in a two-by-four flat. They are ambitious. They want to welcome their children into a real home with real advantages.

Physical fitness being the first great requirement for parenthood, the young married woman cannot be too selfish regarding her own health. She must guard it jealously; and she is

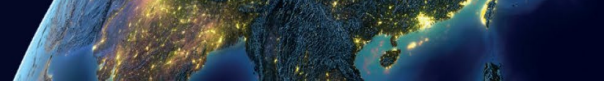


always justified in refusing to sacrifice this health for sentimental reasons. It is her own most precious treasure as well as that of the whole race. With the physical exercises and sports I mentioned above, there is an equal and no less important complementary need of complete relaxation and rest. Too much importance cannot be put on the value of deep untroubled sleep as the completest and sweetest restorer of tired nerves and muscles.

Only secondary to the menace of the great racial diseases is the danger of fatigue to potential motherhood. This truth was brought home to me last summer when I went to Scotland to find out for myself the conditions surrounding motherhood among the workers there. I visited Rosythe, a village made during the war for the housing of dockworkers of the river Forth. Housing conditions there were of course far above the average in comfort and cleanliness. They were occupied for the most part by dockworkers and their wives who had come from Lancashire.

Now under the admirable conditions prevailing there, one had good reason to expect that the babies -- and there were hundreds of them -- would be at least a bit above the average in health and liveliness. But there were large numbers of them who, in spite of their appearance of being well fed and well cared for, nevertheless, were wistfully lackadaisical and lazy. They were not so lively as regular' babies. Nor were they, I was assured by nurses and physicians, the victims of any hereditary diseases. What then was the matter?

They were born tired. Their mothers were tired. These women, as I soon found out once I began to follow this interesting clue, had been tired practically all their lives. Obligated at the age of nine or ten to put in long, monotonous, fatiguing hours in the mills and factories of Lancashire, their bodies became misshapen. And these poor women had practically upon their marriage, been plunged directly into the task of motherhood. There had been no interval of rest and relaxation, no recovery from the permanent fatigue of mill and factory. Their children were born tired.



There is a temporary fatigue and a permanent fatigue. The influence of the mother on her child is one so obvious that it is evident to all, and yet only now are we beginning to wake up to its tremendous, its almost overwhelming importance to the next generation and the whole future of our race.

The whole tendency of the new psychology is to trace the troubles and the weaknesses of our adult life (the physical and the psychical always closely interacting) back to the shocks, the hurts, the miseries of childhood. More and more infancy and childhood are becoming the most important period of life. If we take care of the children, we may be sure that they will soon take care of themselves. It is in the realization of the tremendous importance of each and every child brought in to this world, that the exponents of birth control emphasize the necessity, by means of the limitation of parenthood, of expending a thousand times more care and attention upon every child than is the good fortune of any child to receive now.

Every mother and mother-to-be should protect the fundamental rights of her babies and in fact of all babies. Baby's rights' have been well formulated by my friend Marie Carmichael Stopes: They are:

"To be wanted.

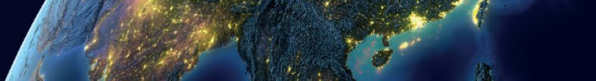
"To be loved before birth as well as after birth.

"To be given a body untainted by a heritable disease, uncontaminated by any of the racial poisons.

"To be fed on the food that nature supplies, or, if that fails, the very nearest substitute that can be discovered.

"To have fresh air to breathe; to play in the sunshine with his limbs free in the air; to crawl about on sweet clean grass.

"When he is good to do what a baby wants to do and not what his parents want; for instance,

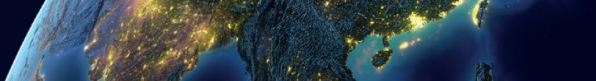


to sleep most of his time, not to sit up and crow in response to having his cheeks pinched or his sides tickled.

"When he is naughty, to do what his parents want and not what he wants; to be made to understand the law of the jungle.' From his earliest days he must be disciplined in relation to the great physical facts of existence, to which he will always hereafter have to bow. The sooner he comprehends this, the better for his future."

If intelligent and wide awake mothers of these United States would protect these rights not only for their own children but for all, motherhood would then be truly mobilized. When we see little children occasionally cuffed, kicked, dragged, pulled, shoved, and cursed through the streets or crowds of our great cities, our blood boils and we are often thoughtlessly angered. But look into the situation. You will find, as so often I have found, that the poor mother is the victim of fatigue. Her family is too large; she is distracted; and the unfortunate child becomes the butt of the poor woman's nervous, mental and physical fatigue. It is better to prevent the recurrence of this overworked and overtired motherhood than to place the blame on these victims of our present legalized barbarism.

Here is another grave danger that confronts even the physically fit young mother. Few women are strong enough to retain their normal health and strength under the ordeal of rapid successions of pregnancy, childbearing and child rearing with no well-spaced intervals of rest and relaxation. This is a point that most opponents of Birth Control forget or ignore, failing absolutely to note the inevitable and unavoidable fatigue of the poor mother and the deplorable reaction of this fatigue upon her children. In the supreme self-sacrifice of motherhood, women often forget their duty to the children they have already brought into the world, and in submitting to successive pregnancies, find that they have wrecked their own youth and health and thus become themselves prematurely old and worn out.

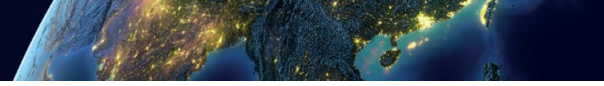


If the healthy and intelligent motherhood that is now becoming a hopeful reality in our society were the only factor in the situation to reckon with, all would be well. But to-day, as always in the past, such mothers find themselves surrounded by less healthy, less intelligent, less discriminating mothers. And the children of feeble-minded, the diseased and the mentally dwarfed drag down the standards of schools and society. It is one of the strange paradoxes of human existence that while health itself is not contagious or infectious, diseases -- the great social scourges -- are. So that health, so precious to the individual and the race, must continually defend itself, defend itself against the inroads of disease and its baneful train of evils and miseries.

Therefore, if motherhood is to be mobilized for the protection of the children, the intelligent mother cannot and will not confine her attention and interest merely to her own home. It is to her interest that all the children of the families of her community and country be endowed with the birthright of health and happiness. Neither in the neighborhood nor the school should the progress of the normal, healthy, growing child be impeded by those poor little victims of hereditary disease whose bodies and brains are incurably subnormal from the start. While everything must be done to right the wrong that was committed in bringing them with such tragic handicaps into this world, it is certainly not the children of the next generation -- the veritable torchbearers of the race -- upon whose shoulders this load should be placed.

Many fine women in America to-day are courageously facing this problems of less fortunate mothers and children, are realizing that motherhood to be true and beautiful must extend its power beyond the individual home, are realizing that motherhood must be a socialized force, and are seeking to express this feeling in various charities.

They support milk stations, nutrition clinics, charitable institutions of all kinds, and advocate maternity bills in the state and federal legislatures which seek to improve the



conditions under which children are brought into the world. But none of these measures, I am convinced really strikes at the root of the evil. Legislation may do something to lessen evils, but it cannot by itself prevent them. The crying need is not for palliatives but for prevention, for the dissemination of knowledge of Birth Control.

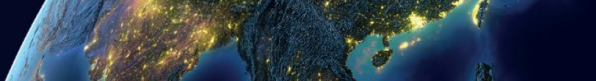
What we need is the spread, gradual but sure, of intelligence to all mothers. This can be done only by the co-operation of the awakened mothers of America, counseling and helping the less fortunate and unenlightened mothers with whom they come in contact. It will be a day -[by]- day, unending and often thankless task, [*but*] gradually the woman who courageously undertakes it will see the beneficial results of her influence, and the growth of a true hygienic and healthful power. She will discover that the response among the poor women of her acquaintance is truly touching and their immense gratitude will be her great reward.

Understand that I do not mean by this a prying into the lives and affairs of other women. I object to "butting in." Tact is one of the first essentials in these matters as in everything else. But on the basis of the eternal dignity of motherhood, in the interests of the children, you will find that there is a strong bond between all mothers. It is an easy thing to inspire the confidence of the mother who is now the victim of a grave social injustice.

Speak always of the sacred and moral value of health, both for the mother and the child.

Is it not possible that out of this spirit of mobilized motherhood, there may grow up a great power among women which can be so organized as to prevent the repetition of all these menaces to the next generation? I am optimistic enough to believe so.

I am convinced that the question of Birth Control most dramatically illuminates the present slavery of motherhood in America. Whatever your present ideas on this pressing problem are, however unimportant it may seem to you personally, try to understand its relation to the great problems that confront the whole world to-day.



I have discovered that many who oppose it are not in the least informed on the great problems of parenthood and population. Therefore, aiming for the true mobilization of motherhood, let me make these few suggestions to every mother and every other woman in the country.

Find out for yourself the laws in your State concerning the dissemination of Birth Control information.

Find out for yourself the opinion of your family physician concerning the wisdom of such statutes.

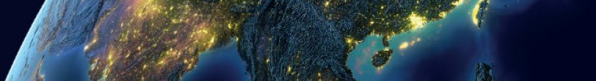
Find out for yourself the feelings of the women of your acquaintance and the neighborhood concerning the wisdom of Birth Control and the circulation of information concerning it.

Before condemning it, let the problem be thoroughly, frankly and openly discussed.

If you are a member of a woman's club or organization, demand that the matter be presented by competent speakers on Birth Control. In this way, you can inform yourself on all the phases of Birth Control, from the point of social hygiene, eugenics, individual health of mother and child, and as a factor in fighting those great plagues of tuberculosis and venereal diseases.

This knowledge will be of the greatest aid to you in another direction. More and more we Americans, both individually and as a nation, are asked to support charities and philanthropies. Without questioning the worthiness or the value of these efforts to ameliorate the miseries of the world, we may and should make sure that we are not dropping our dollars into a bottomless pit. Therefore we are all of us justified in answering each of these appeals for charitable purposes by asking the following pertinent questions:

"What is your organization doing in addition to alleviating the miseries you describe, toward preventing a recurrence of such conditions?"



"Do you consider the dissemination of knowledge of Birth Control as an effective factor toward the prevention of heritable diseases or conditions unfavorable to the next generation?"

Many philanthropies and charitable enterprises, while admitting the efficacy of Birth Control toward the prevention of miseries in the immediate future, nevertheless cannot spread this knowledge because the supporters of the charities, they point out, do not believe in it.

An awakened and enlightened public opinion, particularly of a mobilized and militant motherhood, might accomplish in this field invaluable benefits and put us on the surest and straightest road to radiant racial health.

Source: Margaret Sanger. "No Healthy Race Without Birth Control [March 1921]," *The Margaret Sanger Papers Project*, New York University. <https://sanger.hosting.nyu.edu/>

- In your own words, what are Sanger's arguments in favor of birth control? Why does she think birth control is necessary?
- How does Sanger define what constitutes a "healthy race"?
- In what ways does Sanger connect birth control with broader public health issues?
- How does this essay reflect the eugenics movement that was influential in the 1910s through the 1940s? Which of her arguments align with eugenics, and how should we understand these in historical context?
- Considering her role in leading the movement for birth control and her alignment with eugenics, how do you see Sanger's legacy in the twenty-first century?