

Margaret Sanger, "Planning Your Children," *Voice of Youth*, June 1936.

Planning Your Children

By Margaret Sanger

PARENTHOOD, when it is responsible, can be a noble trust, a proud commission, an honored assignment. But this can be accomplished only by taking it out of the sphere of accident and placing it in the sphere of conscious responsibility.

When this is done every child will be a wanted child, born to its rightful heritage of love, care, and comfort.

Science has taught us how to take parenthood out of the sphere of accident, how to plan for the number of children in a family, and the intervals between their births. The idea that this should be done in accordance with the health of the mother and the income of the family seems obvious. But our adult world has been too dull, too timorous, and too bigoted to take advantage of this knowledge. We have hedged it in with taboos and legal restrictions; we are directly responsible for the present deplorable situation in which the well-to-do can secure birth control information, but the poor who need it most, are deprived of it.

The Youth of America, and of the world, however, gives evidence of viewing the matter more sanely, and more courageously. They apparently realize that birth control, the knowledge of how to make parenthood a responsible, voluntary trust, rather than a blind accident, is one of the most fundamental issues before the world today. It can make or mar a marriage. It can, I venture to say, help us solve our present tragic unemployment and relief problem, and it can profoundly affect international relations and world peace.

"A century of stationary population," writes Professor Henry Pratt Fairchilds of New York University, "would do more to promote the cause of peace and prevent international wars than all the peace treaties and disarmament conventions that have ever been signed, or ever will be signed."

One of the most significant indications of youth's interest in birth control comes from the office of the U.S. Commissioner of Education. In connection with a nation-wide Public Forum project, a conference of youth leadership, representing from one to one and a half million young people, was asked to vote on topics for forum discussion. The question "Should birth control information be permitted to be sent through the mails and disseminated through clinics?" was given second choice out of 115 topics and was placed first within its own category, Social Problems. Incidentally, economic problems were voted first place in the general divisions and social problems second.

At present, as a result of laws passed in 1873 at the instigation of Anthony Comstock, "the prevention of conception" is classed with obscenity. The United States Criminal Codes make it a serious crime, carrying a penalty of \$5,000 or five years in prison or both, for anyone, even a

physician to send through the mails or common carriers any information or article "designed, adapted or intended" to prevent conception. The situation is further complicated and rendered paradoxical by the fact that the laws of more than forty states permit physicians to prescribe contraception to their patients. But how, may I ask, can a doctor prescribe birth control if they are not permitted to receive data and supplies?

The birth control bill now before Congress, introduced into the Senate by Senator Royal S. Copeland of New York, and into the House by Representative Percy L. Gassaway of Oklahoma, would permit the use of the mails and common carriers for sending contraceptive information and supplies only to the medical profession in states where physicians are already permitted to prescribe contraception.

This seems little enough to ask. The number of men in Congress willing to support the bill has increased greatly, and this support is matched by ever increasing numbers of individuals and groups in the public at large. But the bill has not yet been enacted into law.

In 1916 I opened a birth control clinic in Brooklyn, which was promptly closed as a "public nuisance." In 1923, following a test case and a decision permitting physicians to give birth control advice for the "cure and prevention of disease," the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau, of which I am the director, was opened. It has functioned continuously since that time and is now the largest in the world as well as the oldest in America. Since then clinics have sprung up all over the country, until there are now approximately 250, taking care of poor mothers who cannot afford to go to private physicians.

Splendid as is the work being done by these clinics, it is only a drop in the bucket compared with what needs to be done. Every hospital and dispensary in the land should have a birth control clinic. Birth control should be part of the public health work of the United States government. Every young mother, as part of her postnatal care, should be given scientific birth control advice in order that her next child need not come before she has fully regained her strength. Every newly married couple should have this advice so that they can plan their family, allowing, in general, some time to adapt themselves to each other before the coming of children.

All this will be possible if the absurd law, placed on the statute books over fifty years ago is changed. The bills now before Congress, Senate bill No. 4000 and House bill No. 11330, should be passed.

Some sort of birth control is being practiced everywhere today, and will continue to be practiced, for birth control is here to stay. You cannot get people to "unlearn" the knowledge that there is some way of planning families. America's youth has a right to ask their parents, teachers, doctors, ministers, and congressmen which is better; bootleg, uncertain and often harmful methods promoted by commercial concerns for profit, or scientific, harmless, efficient methods prescribed by physicians for the best interests of young married people and their children.