Margaret Sanger was a controversial figure in her day. She introduced the term birth control to American couples, she encouraged people to explore the pleasures of passionate and sexual love, and she wrote frankly about the topic. She advocated the use of contraceptives for working class people, to control family growth at an economically manageable level, and also to the middle class, to postpone the arrival of children so the couple could build their relationship on the pleasure of intimate knowledge of each other.


PREMATURE PARENTHOOD AND WHY TO AVOID IT

Coming together with widely differing likes and dislikes, varying inheritances and often with widely divergent training and ideals, the two young people who marry will not be long in discovering that they may have much less in common than they had ever dreamed possible.

When Society has tossed them a marriage certificate and the Church has concluded the ceremony which has legally united them, they are then forced back upon their own resources. Society, so to speak, has washed its hands of the young couple, or cast this man and this woman into the deep waters of matrimony, where they are left to sink or swim as best they may.

The certificate of marriage solves nothing. Rather it accentuates the greater and more complex problems of life. To find a solution to this great problem of living together and growing together requires all the combined intelligence and foresight both man and woman can command. Drifting into this relation will offer no solution, for very often those who drift into marriage, drift out of it in the same aimless fashion.

Others, who have not realized that the marriage of a man and woman is not merely a legal sanction for parenthood, but that it is an important relation in itself—the most important one in human life—often find themselves defeated and forced into an accidental and premature parenthood for which they are not financially or spiritually prepared.

Two years at least are necessary to cement the bonds of love and to establish the marriage relation. Parenthood should therefore be postponed by every young married couple until at least the third year of marriage.

Why is this advisable?

When the young wife is forced into maternity too soon, both are cheated out of marital adjustment and harmony that require time to mature and develop. The plunge into parenthood prematurely with all its problems and disturbances, is like the blighting of a bud before it has been given time to blossom.

Even in the fully matured healthy wife pregnancy has a disturbing physiological and nervous reaction. Temporarily the whole character and temperament of the woman undergoes profound changes. Usually nausea, headaches, irritability, loss of appetite, ensue. At the beginning of this period there develop temporary eccentricities that do not belong to the woman in her normal condition.

If the bride is enforced into an unwilling or accidental pregnancy during the honeymoon or the early stages of their marital love, the young husband is deprived of the possible opportunity of knowing his wife during one of the most interesting stages of her development. He has known her in the exciting days of courtship and during the heightened though brief period of the honeymoon, and now, alas, she enters all too soon the ominous days of early pregnancy. Never under such conditions can he know her in the growing beauty and ripening of mature womanhood. He has known her as a romantic girl before marriage—and now as a mother-to-be, frightened, timorous, and physically and nervously upset by the great ordeal she must go through.

Here often begins a spiritual separation between husband and wife. Conscious of his own helplessness, likewise of his own responsibility, the young husband feels it his duty to leave her alone. This enforced separation is spiritual rather than physical. Outwardly the relation may seem the same. It may be a separation only in the sense that no real unity or welding has been attained. Engrossed by this new problem, the young wife may resign herself to the inevitable and enters a state of passive resignation that is deadening to her love-life. She is in no condition to enjoy companionship. Beneath the superficial and conventional expression of happiness at the approaching parenthood, there may rankle a suppressed resentment at the young husband’s careless pride in becoming a father. The young bride knows that she is paying too great a price for the brief and happy days of her honeymoon. She has been swept too rapidly from girlhood to motherhood. Love and romance, as many young wives have confessed to me, were but traps leading her to endless travail and enslavement. And this hidden rankling is often directed toward the husband, whom the wife holds responsible for her accidental pregnancy.

This unhappy condition would not have occurred if they had time to become one, if there were a period of two
years during which the bonds of love might be firmly cemented, for time alone can produce this unity. It is a process of growth. Married love does not spring fullgrown into life. It is a delicate plant and it grows from the seed. It must be deeply and firmly rooted, nourished by the sunlight of tenderness, courtship and mutual consideration, before it can produce fine flowers and fruits. This period is as essential for human development as the period of body-building and adolescence.

It is a period of mutual adjustment. It is a period of spiritual discovery and exploration, of finding one’s self and one’s beloved. It is a period for the full and untroubled expression of passionate love. It is a period for cultural development. It thrusts forward its own complex problems—problems, let it be understood, intricately complex in themselves. Husband and wife must solve many problems only by living through them, not by any cut and dried rules and regulations. For marriage brings with it problems that are individual and unique for each couple.

If instead of solving these problems of early parenthood, in which the life of a third person is immediately involved, a child thrusts itself into the lives of young husband and wife, these fundamental problems of marriage are never given the attention they deserve. A new situation arises, and in innumerable cases, love, as the old adage has it, flies out of the window.

We must recognize that the whole position of womanhood has changed today. Not so many years ago it was assumed to be a just and natural state of affairs that marriage was considered as nothing but a preliminary to motherhood. A girl passed from the guardianship of her father or nearest male relative to that of her husband. She had no will, no wishes of her own. Hers not to question why, but merely to fulfill duties imposed upon her by the man into whose care she was given.

Today women are on the whole much more individual. They possess as strong likes and dislikes as men. They live more and more on the plane of social equality with men. They are better companions. We should be glad that there is more enjoyable companionship and real friendship between men and women.

This very fact, it is true, complicates the marriage relation, and at the same time enables it. Marriage no longer means the slavish subservience of the woman to the will of the man. It means, instead, the union of two strong and highly individualized natures. Their first problem is to find out just what the terms of this partnership are to be. Understanding full and complete cannot come all at once, in one revealing flash. It takes time to arrive at a full and sympathetic understanding of each other, and mutually to arrange lives to increase this understanding. Out of the mutual adjustments, harmony must grow and discord gradually disappear.

These results cannot be obtained if the problem of parenthood is thrust upon the young husband and wife before they are spiritually and economically prepared to meet it. For naturally the coming of the first baby means that all other problems must be thrust aside. That baby is a great fact, a reality that must be met. Preparations must be made for its coming. The layette must be prepared. The doctor must be consulted. The health of the wife may need consideration. The young mother will probably prefer to go to the hospital. All of these preparations are small compared to the régime after the coming of the infant.

In the wife who has lived through a happy marriage, for whom the bonds of passionate love have been fully cemented, maternal desire is intensified and matured. Motherhood becomes for such a woman not a penalty or a punishment, but the road by which she travels onward toward completely rounded self-development. Motherhood thus helps her toward the unfolding and realization of her higher nature.

Her children are not mere accidents, the outcome of chance. When motherhood is a mere accident, as so often it is in the early years of careless or reckless marriages, a constant fear of pregnancy may poison the days and nights of the young mother. Her marriage is thus converted into a tragedy. Motherhood becomes for her a horror instead of a joyfully fulfilled function.

Millions of marriages have been blighted, not because of any lack of love between the young husband and wife, but because children have come too soon. Often these brides become mothers before they have reached even physical maturity, before they have completed the period of adolescence. This period in our race is as a rule complete around the age of twenty-three. Motherhood is possible after the first menstruation. But what is physically possible is very often from every other point of view inadvisable. A young woman should be fully matured from every point of view—physically, mentally and psychically before maternity is thrust upon her.

Those who advise early maternity neglect the spiritual foundation upon which marriage must inevitably be built. This takes time. They also ignore the financial responsibility a family brings.

The young couple begin to build a home. They may have just enough to get along together. The young wife, as in so many cases of early marriage these days, decides to continue her work. They are partners in every way—a commendable thing. The young man is just beginning his career—his salary is probably small. Nevertheless, they manage to get along, their hardships are amusing, and are looked upon as fun. Then suddenly one day, the young wife announces her pregnancy. The situation changes immediately. There are added expenses. The wife must give up her work. The husband must go into debt to pay the expenses of the new and joyfully received arrival. The novelty lasts for some time.
The young wife assumes the household duties and the ever growing care of the infant. For a time the child seems to bring the couple closer together. But more often there ensues a concealed resentment on the part of the immature mother at the constant drudgery and slavery to the unfortunate child who has arrived too early upon the scene, which has interfered with her love life.

For the unthinking husband, the “proud papa,” the blushing bride is converted at once into the “mother of my children.” It is not an unusual occurrence to find that three months after the birth of the baby, the parents are thinking and speaking to each other as “mumsy” and “daddy.” The lover and sweetheart relation has disappeared forever and the “mamma-papa” relation has taken its place.

Instead of being a self-determined and self-directing love, everything is henceforward determined by the sweet tyranny of the child. I know of several young mothers, despite a great love for the child, to rebel against this intolerable situation. Vaguely feeling that this new maternity has rendered them unattractive to their husbands, slaves to deadly routine of bottles, baths and washing, they have revolted. I know of innumerable marriages which have been wrecked by premature parenthood.

Love has ever been blighted by the coming of children before the real foundations of marriage have been established. Quite aside from the injustice done to the child who has been brought accidentally into the world, this lamentable fact sinks into insignificance when compared to the injustice inflicted by chance upon the young couple, and the irreparable blow to their love occasioned by premature or involuntary parenthood.

For these reasons, in order that harmonious and happy marriage may be established as the foundation for happy homes and the advent of healthy and desired children, premature parenthood must be avoided. Birth Control is the instrument by which this universal problem may be solved.

1. How does Sanger view women and how does she rank their importance in society?
2. How would John Kellogg react to Sanger’s advice?
3. How might Sanger’s advice conflict with the contemporary views of the dutiful nobility of motherhood and the status children were alleged to convey on a woman?