

# The Sex Education of Children: A Book for Parents (1931), by Mary Ware Dennett

Mary Coffin Ware Dennett, a supporter of sex education for children in the US in the early twentieth century, wrote *The Sex Education of Children: A Book for Parents* as a resource for parents teaching their children about sex. Vanguard Press in New York City, New York, published *The Sex Education of Children* in 1931. Dennett's book addresses issues that Dennett argued parents should know about sex to provide their children with an accurate portrayal of the topic. In addition to expressing Dennett's views on sex education, *The Sex Education of Children* was one of the few works during the early 1900s in the US to advocate for increased communication with children about reproductive health.

In the nineteenth century in the US, many argued that sex education was an inappropriate topic of conversation. However, that attitude began to change in the 1920s as people began to champion the claim that sex could be for both procreation and pleasure. Some people began to advocate for freer discussion of sex and for access to contraception so women could control their reproduction. Toward that end, activists used printed resources such as pamphlets, books, and newsletters to disseminate information.

Dennett, a birth control and sex education activist in New York City, New York, became involved in sex education because as a single mother she faced the task of teaching her teenage sons about sex. In 1915, Dennett wrote an essay, "The Sex Side of Life," for her fourteen-year-old son, Carlton. In the essay, Dennett described sex and attempted to disabuse her son of ideas she thought harmful, like the idea that sex should be feared. The essay became popular among other parents, and Dennett started to circulate the essay through the mail until 1929, when she was charged with breaking the Comstock Act in *United States v. Dennett*, decided by the Eastern District court of New York. The Comstock Act, enacted in 1873, prohibited the mailing of any material that the postmasters of the post office classified as obscene, including erotic images and literature containing information related to sex or contraceptives. While Dennett was found guilty of breaking the Comstock Act, she appealed the decision and in 1930 was cleared of all charges. After the court case, Dennett wrote a book for parents to accompany her pamphlet for children.

Dennett's book, *The Sex Education of Children*, contains a preface, seven chapters, and five items in an appendix. According to Dennett, her book is her way of having a discussion with parents about sex education. She states that her book developed from the many conversations and correspondence she had with worried parents about how to speak with their children about sex. The seven chapters focus on different perceptions of sex and sex education for parents to properly approach and educate their children about sex. The materials in the appendices are further resources for parents. In the preface, Dennett states that her book is for the average parent, one who worries about his or her child having a healthy adult sex life.

In the first chapter, "Education — Whether or No," Dennett claims that children begin forming ideas about sex based on the emotions expressed by their parents on the topic. Dennett provides the example of a parent angrily scolding a young child for touching his or her body and argues that such a reaction instills a sense of fear and shame in the child that continues into adulthood. Dennett argues that if a child grows up with parents who treat sex as a forbidden and shameful topic, the child will form a negative impression about sex that will not change even if their future experiences are positive. She emphasizes the importance of honesty and communication between parent and child. In particular, Dennett states that parents should discuss the sex information that children

hear among their peers. Doing so enables the parents to correct any misinterpretations and to get rid of any unease surrounding the topic.

In addition to emphasizing the impact of the parents' attitude towards sex in the first chapter, Dennett also discusses love between a child's parents. She argues that, more than any other factor, witnessing love in their parents' relationship influences children to view sex without shame or fear. According to Dennett, the children of parents who genuinely love each other are more likely to have happy sex lives than the children of parents who do not have a loving relationship. Dennett concludes that children are more influenced by their parents' attitudes and emotions towards sex than their actions or words. When children grow up in a single-parent home or a home in which conflict exists between spouses, those children develop a faulty perception of sex. Dennett asserts that in her book she hopes to give single parents and parents unhappy with their spouses a way to mend those negative interpretations, and to restore the child's potential for a healthy and happy sex life.

In the second chapter, "Fear and Shame," Dennett argues that sex has instilled fear and shame in people across different time periods, countries, and races. She claims that in the US, shame and fear develop in children because sex has been characterized as something that is dirty, and because society rejects those who are interested in it. Dennett connects those guilty emotions to the Christian thought and organizations in US society. However, she notes that parents and teachers have started to educate children about sex to eliminate the previous emotions of fear and shame. Dennett argues that once children start to fear sex and become ashamed of their natural desires, their ability to have healthy relationships is hindered.

In the third chapter, "The 'Sacred' Handicap and the New Reverence," Dennett explores the impact that religion has on US society's approach to sex. Dennett claims that Christian religions control sex by restricting it to marriage. She states that sex is labeled sinful unless it is for the purpose of reproduction. Dennett argues that that view ruins marriages because both the wife and husband are forced to make the experience as solemn and sacred as possible, instead of expressing their love for each other through delight and playfulness in the act.

In "Bravado and Verve," the fourth chapter, Dennett observes that people who confuse the difference between bravado and verve are not happy with their sex lives. People searching for verve, which Dennett defines as a great joy and poise, resort to bravado, which she defines as bragging, because they do not know how to attain the former. Dennett remarks that men and women who express bravado towards sex mask their unhappiness by bragging about their sex partners or activities. Dennett calls upon the older generation to encourage and teach the younger generation how to view life with verve instead of with bravado. Instead of viewing love as a possession, Dennett argues that more people should view love as an emotion that can be developed.

In the fifth chapter, "Privacy Instead of Modesty," Dennett argues that while modesty used to force people to be sexually self-conscious, a lack of modesty has caused unhealthy exhibitionism among people. While both excess modesty and exhibitionism are damaging, Dennett argues that people should start to view modesty not as a rule, but as an attitude. Instead of rejecting modesty because people see it as a rule to be broken, people should focus on the emotions they feel when they wear certain clothes or do certain things. Dennett discusses privacy, stating that it is similar yet different from modesty. Dennett says that while modesty has to do with concealing shame, privacy means not intruding on the private thoughts and feelings of others. She argues that those who give others their privacy respect other people's individuality, and so those people maintain their dignity and self-respect. In that way, Dennett says, privacy has nothing to do with concealing shame. Dennett concludes that parents who understand the importance of respecting privacy, in contrast to those who only support modesty as a rule, will raise children who are more comfortable about sex.

In the sixth chapter, "Sex and Humor," Dennett claims that society views humor towards sex as vulgar, and she argues that that view is incorrect because humor is an essential aspect of human nature and should not be suppressed in relation to sex. Dennett states that while she agrees that humor and lewdness are often combined in a joke, they should not be confused with each other. People will consider only something with a shameful connotation to be crude when joked about, and Dennett argues that sex should not be perceived as something shameful. In addition, she claims

