



from  
SWEETHEART  
to **STEAMROLLER**

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DIANE  
SELKIRK

**When you're having a baby, people-pleasing becomes a thing of the past**

**A**fter Krista Jennings, of Seattle, sent her disappointing meal back to the restaurant kitchen she laughed with embarrassment, "I never would have done that before, but since I became pregnant, I keep shocking myself with how assertive I am."

You expect your tummy to grow when you're pregnant, but women are often surprised by a growth in confidence that can also result. "Knowing I'm pregnant just makes me feel more grown-up. I know it sounds silly, but it seems easier to stand up for myself," Jennings explains.

It turns out that Jennings' experience isn't unique. Many experts believe that women are hardwired to become more assertive once they are mothers. "Pregnancy is the training ground for motherhood," explains Ellen Sue Stern, author

of *Expecting Change: The Emotional Journey Through Pregnancy*. "Once we become mothers, our priorities change—we need to be ready to protect our children."

From the time we are little girls, we're taught how to be nice, how to help others, and how to empathize. This often means you may end up putting your own needs on the back burner. Being assertive can be hard for some women, but Stern says pregnancy can be transforming, "When our bodies change, our self-image changes." Some women may feel more substantial, while others become less concerned with how others view them. The result? Pregnancy gives women permission to ask for what they need.

"When I first got on the subway with my huge belly, I couldn't believe no one would give me a seat." Cindy Wallach,

of Annapolis, MD, says. "At first I tried to tell myself that the other passengers obviously had a reason for not offering me a place to sit, but then I thought about my swollen ankles and aching back and it just sort of slipped out." Wallach says she made a loud comment that she couldn't believe that no one was willing to offer a pregnant woman a seat. "Suddenly six people jumped up. All of them apologized."

Assertiveness rises up during pregnancy for a few reasons. First, you're acutely aware that you are protecting and nurturing the little life that's growing inside you. On top of this new responsibility, you might be worn out, so your fuse is shorter than normal. Then there are those infamous hormones churning up your emotions. Add a bit of unsolic-

ited advice or inconsiderate behavior to the mix, and it's no surprise that some women make the transition from sweetheart to steamroller in one swift move.

For some women, this is when the distinction between being assertive and being aggressive gets lost. Nancy O'Reilly, Psy.D., founder of [womenspeak.com](http://womenspeak.com), a website devoted to giving women a forum to speak up, explains that being assertive comes down to having a voice, "You have to say what you think and what you feel, but not at the expense of someone else."

Helen Colbeck, a Canadian living in Doha, Qatar, says she found her voice when her husband, Marc, objected to a home birth, "He's a paramedic, and to him birth was an emergency." Colbeck discovered that standing up for herself meant more than simply following

through with a well-researched birth plan, "I was less likely to hold my ground before I became pregnant, but learning to be assertive has been one of the best gifts motherhood has brought me."

Many women, like Colbeck, initially flex their new assertiveness muscles while taking care of their pregnancy, but once they have the skills, something wonderful can happen, "I stood up for the baby because I had to. I loved her fiercely because I couldn't help it, and in the process I learned to stand up for and love myself." **D**

*Diane Selkirk found pregnancy made it easier for her to be assertive about asking her husband to help out more around the house. Her husband found her pregnancy made him less assertive about saying no. Now he has some great new laundry skills.*

## To keep your new assertiveness skills intact,

Amy Tiemann, Ph.D. author of *Mojo Mom: Nurturing Your Self While Raising a Family*, says you'll need to balance your new identity with your old one, "The transformation of motherhood can lead you to re-evaluate your whole sense of self." Nancy O'Reilly, Psy.D., says valuing yourself is key, "Where self-esteem is built, assertiveness will follow." O'Reilly and Tiemann offer these tips for growing into your new role with confidence:

- **Develop your artistic interests.** "Writing, painting, sculpture, dance, even exercise can provide you a much needed time for mental privacy and chance to blow off emotional steam," Tiemann says.
- **Ask a role model to share her assertiveness secrets with you.** O'Reilly says the advice may be as basic as, "Fake it until you feel it."
- **Find your voice and use it to get what you need.** Learn to ask friends and family for exactly what you need. "Let go of the romantic fantasy that your husband can read your mind," Tiemann says.
- **Keep practicing.** If asserting yourself is new or uncomfortable, know that you will get better at it with practice.