

# NEWS RELEASE



**For Immediate Release:  
November 10, 2008**

Contact: **Leanne Rorick, Ombudsman Program Coordinator, Genesee County**  
Lifespan, 1900 South Clinton Avenue, Rochester NY 14618  
585.402.8480

## Elderspeak: A Scary Resemblance to Baby Talk

“Hi there Bertha, how is my sweetie doing today?” “Honey, are you ready for your medicine?” “Good evening, young lady. Are you ready for bed?” These sound like examples of a mother talking to a child, right? Wrong. This is the way some young aides are talking to older adults, and it has an uncanny resemblance to the way parents talk to toddlers.

Elderspeak is the term that refers to the language adjustment used when speaking to older adults. Characterized by the same high-pitched, sing-song language we use to speak to infants and toddlers, this overly caring or controlling language is a highly scrutinized topic among advocates and health professionals. Using terms like “honey” or “dear,” or referring to an aging adult by their first name are all examples of elderspeak.

There are many normal changes that we experience when we age, in thinking and communicating. Some aspects of elderspeak are well-intended, such as simplifying the length and complexity of phrases, paraphrasing, and speaking at a slower rate – all of which can be helpful tools.

So, why so much scrutiny? Aren’t there some who would find this language endearing? With the exception of very few adults, most find this type of language demoralizing and down-right rude. We hear elderspeak in nursing homes, hospitals, and even banks and grocery stores which indicates that its use has more to do with stereotyping than responding to actual behavior.

Researchers such as Kristine Williams, associate professor at the University of Kansas School of Nursing, have studied the negative effects of elderspeak on older adults and on persons with Alzheimer's disease. She found that the use of elderspeak implies that that the person is not competent and can diminish confidence in his or her abilities. Williams even found that the chances of an older adult being resistant to care doubles when the caregiver uses elderspeak. Because elderspeak often means exaggerating words, or posing statements as questions, it can even decrease comprehension.

Dignity and respect are rights which should be afforded to us all and are protected by law for all residents of nursing homes and adult care facilities. There are many positive, respectful ways to talk to our elders. Elderspeak is not one of them.

*Volunteer long-term care ombudsman serve at every nursing home and adult care facility in Genesee County. They are trained professionals who assist with and investigate resident concern and advocate for the rights of residents in long term care facilities. If you believe that the rights of your loved one have been violated, or if you would like advice or assistance, call Lifespan at 585.244.8400 x114. The Ombudsman assigned to the facility can assist you with your concern.*

*Leanne Rorick is the Ombudsman Program Coordinator for Genesee County. She can be reached at 585.402.8480 or [lrorick@lifespan-roch.org](mailto:lrorick@lifespan-roch.org).*

# # # # #