

## Respect for the Elderly - Part 14

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and Betty Blair



**A**zerbaijanis hold tremendous respect for the elderly. You'll even see strangers going out of their way to help older people and not just to cross the street. If there's a long line at the market or post office, for instance, elderly people are often invited to move to the front of it. When the road police pull a car over (possibly looking for a bribe) and then discover an elderly person sitting inside, they are likely to wave the car along without checking for documents. In general, older people occupy a unique, privileged position in society. The following patterns of speech reveal what Azerbaijanis consider to be respectful behavior toward the elderly.

Various proverbs illustrate the deferential attitude that Azerbaijanis hold toward the elderly:

**Qoca evin sütünüdür.**  
The elderly are the pillars of the home.

**Böyüyün sözünə baxmayan peşman olar.**  
The one who doesn't listen to older people will regret it in the end.

**Çox yaşayan çox bilər.**  
He who lives long, knows a lot.

**Təzə süpürgə yaxşı süpürsə də, köhnə süpürgə hər küncü tanıyır.**  
Even though a new broom sweeps well, an old broom knows all the nooks and crannies.

### ADVICE FROM ELDERS

In families, neighborhoods and workplaces, younger people look up to their elders and often ask their opinions before making a decision. Children invariably seek their advice when undertaking a serious decision in life, such as marriage, purchasing property or choosing a profession. In turn, many Azerbaijani parents think that their children could not survive without parental guidance, even on simple matters. If you ask: "Why are you helping him so much? He's not a child. He's 40 years old."

The answer is likely to be:

**Mənim üçün həmişə uşaqdır. 100 yaşında da olsa, mənim üçün uşaq olaraq qalacaqdır.**  
For me he's always a child. Even when he's 100, he'll remain a child for me.

**Ana üçün onun uşağı həmişə uşaqdır. Neçə yaşında olmasının fərqi yoxdur. / Fərqi yoxdur neçə yaşındadır.**  
For a mother, her child is always a child. Age doesn't matter. / It doesn't matter what age he is.

### ADDRESSING THE ELDERLY

It's not polite to speak to the elderly in Azeri using the singular form of "you" with the corresponding singular verb tense. Of course, there are exceptions with family members or a close relatives. It's also considered rude to ask elderly people if they understand something that you've explained, even if they are hard of hearing:



**Başa düşdünüzümü?**  
Did you understand?  
Instead, a person is more likely to ask:

**Fikrimi izah edə bildimmi?**  
Did I explain my opinion?

In other words, if older people don't understand, the speaker suggests that he himself might be the cause for the misunderstanding. Talking back to an older person is considered to be extremely ill mannered. If a younger person is offended, he's more likely to "swallow" his feelings rather than talk back to someone older, especially if the person is a woman.

**Yaşlı qadındır, mən ona nə deyim?**  
She's an old woman, what can I say to her?

**Ağsaqqal kişidir, ona necə cavab qaytarım?**  
He's a white-bearded man (ağhsagğal). How can I answer him back?

Arguing with an elderly person is considered to be very rude, even if the younger person is correct. Exceptions occur if the elder's opinion could

affect an important decision. Instead of arguing, the younger person is likely to remain silent or pretend to agree as expressed in the following proverb:

**Böyük danışanda kiçik susar.**

When an elderly person speaks, a younger person should keep silent.

However, this tendency is beginning to change among Azerbaijani youth. They don't argue with elderly strangers, but if they have to deal with an elderly person on a regular basis, they are more likely to counter or contradict them if they disagree.

**Qocaya hörmət elə ki, sən də qocalanda sənə hörmət etsinlər.**

Respect old people so that when you are old, people will respect you.

At a dinner party, respect is shown to elders by always inviting them to sit at the head of the table:

**Zəhmət olmasa yuxarı başa keçin.**

(Please) move towards the head.

If an elderly man or woman is still standing around the table, a younger person knows never to sit at the head of the table. Similarly if an older person is working in the kitchen, guests will automatically offer to help. Young people are expected to help the elderly when any help is needed. They're supposed to know these things and not be asked.

**Qocadan demək, cavandan kömək.**

The elder hints, the younger should help.

Also, the oldest person at the table is likely to be the first person to be honored with a toast. When tea is served, it's rare for people to start drinking tea or eating before the oldest person begins.

Neighbors are likely to offer to help the elderly with everyday chores like buying bread or taking out the trash. On public transportation, it would be unthinkable for a young person not to stand up and offer their seat to the elderly. Anyone who didn't is likely to be reproached and even reprimanded by nearby passengers. In many situations, younger Azerbaijanis curtail their behavior if they are in the presence of elderly people. For instance, men often won't smoke in front of their elders. (Azerbaijani women generally don't smoke, or at least not openly in public, though it's not unusual to find young women smoking in the restrooms at concert halls and restaurants.)

When we were researching this issue one elderly person told us something that we found quite common.

He said that his son makes a point not to smoke in front of him, even though this son is already 48 years old. "When I enter the room, he stands up, and if he is smoking, he'll try to hide it," the father said. Similarly, a young person will make an effort to sit up properly if his or her parents or grandparents are present.

Young women are likely to be more conservative in their clothing and avoid wearing low-cut dresses or miniskirts as they don't want to offend the older people by showing too much skin. Of course, there are exceptions, particularly when it comes to weddings and concerts.

## RESPECT FOR ONE'S MOTHER

Mothers are very highly respected in Azerbaijani society. In fact, the word "mother" is considered quite sacred. Hundreds of poems and songs have been written to honor mothers. One of these songs, "My Mother" (*Anam Mənim*), is typically sung at Azerbaijani weddings. Several Azerbaijani proverbs express the importance of showing respect toward mothers:

**Ana evin dirəyidir.**

The mother is the pillar of the home.

**Ana haqqı - tanrı haqqı.**

A mother's right is divine right.

**Ana haqqını tapdamaq olmaz.**

Don't violate a mother's rights.

**Ana haqqı ödənməz.**

One can never repay the debt to one's mother.

One such expression taken from the Koran is so familiar that it has become a traditional expression in Azerbaijani society:

**Cənnət ananın ayağı altındadır.**

Paradise lies at the feet of mothers.

Offending one's mother is considered to be a great wrongdoing. Even worse would be to use swear words in relation to anyone's mother as this could lead to a serious fight.

## ELDER CARE

In general, it is considered the duty of the children, especially the sons, to take care of their parents as they grow older.

**Ata-ananın qoca vaxtında oğul əlindən tutar.**

When the parents are old, the son should take care of them. Literally: In the old age of the father-mother, the son should take them by the hand.

In almost all cases, elderly parents live with their children. If the older parents are still healthy, they often take on the responsibility of caring for their grandchildren so that the family never has to hire a babysitter. Older people know they are an integral part of the household and that their efforts count.

If a parent's health has deteriorated, their children become the main caregivers. It's quite usual for the daughter or daughter-in-law to bear the burden of nursing and taking care of the parent's physical needs.

The idea of a retirement home, which is quite usual in many other societies, is still quite unacceptable to Azerbaijanis. Nursing homes do exist but they tend to be for people who don't have any children to care for them. Placing a parent in such an institution is frowned upon.

As with many other aspects of Azerbaijani life these days, attitudes are changing in relationship to age. And yet, because of the stature and respect that society bestows upon age and experience, the elderly don't seem to dread the aging process as much as their counterparts in the West.

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