

Rx for a Willowbrook child: Family love and stimulation

By MAXINE SITTS

There are children who have never seen the moon or the stars and have never smelled a cake baking in a kitchen oven.

The clinical word for them is "underexposed," a term psychologists and social workers use when they talk about institutionalized youngsters.

When you experience a kid clinging to your legs two minutes after he's met you—a 6-year-old who's spent the better part of his life in a home, a good home — that's when you realize that all the stuffed animals in the world can't make up for the lack of a family.

Foster home care can be the answer for many of these youngsters. No institution—no matter how top-rate — can replace a family situation.

Needing the stimulation and love that only a home can give are thousands of children at Willowbrook State School. Because they're retarded, the

stimulation means more to them — more than just affection or comfort. Family life becomes a real learning process—a step in their drive to make the most of themselves.

Gerard O'Regan, head of Willowbrook's social services department, says many retarded children don't differ from "normal" children in a home environment.

"They're loving, warm. They have the same needs as other kids. But they lack intellect."

A big hangup in getting Island families to take on a retarded child, he says is the notion that retarded kids are basically "different."

They aren't, O'Regan contends.

"Whenever I hear someone remark that one of our children doesn't act retarded, I have to laugh," the director says. "There's no set way of acting retarded."

Others are youngsters, unfortunately, whose retardation

is so great and involves many physical handicaps that they fare better in an institution.

But the largest number of Willowbrook children would fit nicely into a home, causing no more disruption than a "normal" child.

O'Regan's comments were aimed at recruiting Island homes for them. About 50 youngsters are in the community now, after being matched with families.

"With a patient population of 5,700, the possibilities for more placements are vast," he says.

The school pays \$150 a month per child and supplies all clothing and medical needs. Some children can be placed in a one-parent situation, O'Regan points out.

For the uncertain parent, Willowbrook offers a preliminary program. A family can "try out" a child for a day or a weekend.