

# The world is brighter in school's baby wards

By JANE KURTIN

The baby wards at Willowbrook State School have their own unique touch of sadness.

These youngest of the patients in the massive institution lie on rubber floor mats or sit in cribs and playpens, and they often appear unreal and doll-like.

Some are afflicted with deformities; but for the most part they're lovable and cuddly, and, like toys, invite human touch.

Because of their irresistible appeal, the infants receive attention from extremely dedicated attendants and from volunteers, who prefer working with them than with other, less attractive patients.

The Infant Training Center, where these children learn to walk and to feed and dress themselves, among other things, is bright, cheerful and filled with toys and learning equipment.

Occupational therapists spend hours with small groups of youngsters and find that they are responsive and very frequently are educable.

For these therapists, who form strong attachments to a number of their patients, it is particularly frustrating to know that the wards they'll go into when they're too old or too big for the baby buildings, will usually put an end to their education.

"Many of the children that we've trained," a therapist with more than 10 years of experience said, "lose everything when they get transferred to other buildings.

"We don't have enough help at all for these kids, but it's worse in the other buildings. They don't have any more toys and they don't get the attention. They end up sitting in day rooms and rocking.

Parents, attendants and professional staff are em-

phatic in their claim that "nearly all the employees at Willowbrook would do a lot more with the patients if they had the time."

In one of the baby wards recently, only two attendants were on hand for 40 children. One worker pointed out that by the time the last of 40 diapers is changed it's time to begin all over again.

"In my experience," said Ralph Giaccio, an Islander whose son has been in the school for 12 years, "the attendants have always been conscientious and helpful."

"The workers here," Giaccio said, "work under a severe handicap. No matter how much they do and how many hours they put in, they couldn't possibly fill the needs of the patients. They can't make up for the personnel shortage."

Giaccio said that until his child was transferred to Building 6 he had little concern with the problems of Willowbrook and was satisfied with the care offered to his son.

"Steven learned a lot at first, and he'd even look forward to going back to Willowbrook when I brought him home on weekends. When he got to Building 6, all that changed.

"First of all," Giaccio continued, "he lost a lot of weight. When I bring him home on weekends now, he devours food and acts quite frightened."

"When I first brought him to his new building, I was told that he'd regress and that he wouldn't have learning opportunities. But I didn't realize the full effect it would have on him."

The importance of attention for patients at Willowbrook was illustrated dramatically by one little smile.

A visitor to one of the wards which houses boys of adolescent

age and up, spotted a patient sitting on a toilet seat and slumped over with his head nearly to the floor.

Forgotten for a few moments by his attendant, who was occupied with other patients in the ward, the young man uttered no sound of complaint.

When led back to his chair in the day room, the patient stared intently in the direction of the strangers who approached him, not really at them. If anything, his face registered fear.

With a few gentle words to this apparently unresponsive boy, and a quick pat on the head, two strangers got a smile. Suddenly, this child seemed more than a lost cause.