

'Moms' decry 'silly' Willowbrook rules

By JANE KURTIN

Not many people give much thought to a light switch.

But for some children, the ones who have lived all their lives in Willowbrook State School, a light switch is worthy of enormous attention and testing. The switches on institution walls aren't used or understood by patients.

But freed from institutional life, such children often respond . . . not just to little things like light switches, but to the light itself—the light of learning, of love, of life.

Four mothers who have for years cared for foster children from Willowbrook State School aired their grievances and described the rewards of caring for retarded youngsters in an interview yesterday.

Commenting on the articles which have been published recently in the Advance, the women, who requested that their names be withheld, agreed that "the situations described were the same long before there was a job freeze."

The four mothers, each speaking of their charges as "our children," described the

problems of acclimating youngsters to normal society when, they claimed, there is little cooperation from the institution which supports them.

"The rules they have about buying clothes for the children in the Family Care Program don't make any sense and make it hard for us to dress the kids like everyone else," one woman said.

"If I'm allotted \$12 for a dress for my little girl, and I want to buy a pants suit for that money, the budget director there won't hear of it. When it says dress, they want a dress.

"It's even sillier than that," another woman said. "We all do our shopping at sales. If I can get two blouses for \$5, I'm not allowed to do it because regulations say one blouse, \$5.

"We're not arguing for more money," the women said, "but we've got to have a more reasonable way of doing things.

"You know," a foster mother of four said, "we get vouchers (which are hard to cash now because Willowbrook isn't reimbursing the stores) and then we have to provide receipts for the exact amount of that voucher.

"For every little thing we want, we've got to make the trip up to Willowbrook. And that's rough because the children get terrified when we go back on the grounds there."

Without exception, each of the foster mothers cited dramatic changes that came over their charges within a few months of their arrival at the private homes.

"Heavens! There isn't any comparison," said one woman. "They're totally different people within a short time after they get used to the house."

"My little girl," another said, "came in April and weighed 23 pounds. She was timid as a mouse and real scared of going outside or of being in the dark.

"Now she weighs 37 pounds and is just as active and happy as any normal child. At first, she didn't even know things like how to use toilet paper."

Each of the mothers spends considerably more than the \$150 monthly stipend for the care of their children.

"When I got my little boy," one mother said, "I found out that he was partially deaf. They didn't know that at the school. I asked for a hearing aid, but

they told me there was no money so I had to buy it for \$72 out of my pocket.

For this mother, there is an additional expense of speech therapy, once a week.

"He gets some speech in school, but not enough to get him talking right. I pay for the extra lessons he needs."

Two of the foster mothers have had the pleasure of seeing their "daughters" married.

"I had my girl for 10 years. When she came, she wouldn't dream of getting on a bus by herself. Eventually, she met a nice boy and after they were dating for a while they decided to get married.

"Well, we had a beautiful wedding in church, with a reception in a hall later on. All the friends and relatives came.

"She's got a baby now and can do most things for herself. The only trouble she has is with adding and subtracting.

"I keep her books for her and send out her checks to pay the bills. That's about all she needs.

"If these people had a chance — half a chance — and someone on the outside to help them with the things that they can't do they'd be all right.