

# Learning to accept is part of her life

By JANE KURTIN

Over the past 11 years Joan Dawson has learned to accept a lot.

First, she had to realize her second child was mentally retarded and because of a regressive brain disease would become increasingly disabled.

Then, she was forced to accept her husband's affair with another woman and finally, she's had to accept the fact her future looks as dismal as the present.

Like many mothers of retarded children at home, Joan Dawson has become intimately acquainted with frustration, resignation and desperation. To keep her daughter, now 14 years old, out of Willowbrook State School, she has watched her emotional life become a shambles and possibly jeopardized the emotional welfare of her normal children.

## ARRIVES AT MEETING

Mrs. Dawson arrived at a meeting of five mothers of retarded children with her daughter, Elizabeth, held firmly by the arm.

Within moments after she entered the room, Elizabeth reached toward the kitchen table and knocked a wallet and keys to the floor.

Her mother maneuvered the girl's coat off, revealing a harness (similar to those worn by overzealous toddlers) to which a long, blue nylon rope was attached. She put her in a chair, out of the way of anything breakable, and tied her down with the rope.

Elizabeth, who Mrs. Dawson says has no hope of ever improving, requires constant attention. The last time she was left with a babysitter for an hour, she grabbed hold of a hot pipe and suffered third degree burns on her hand.

"I noticed that something was wrong with Elizabeth when she was three years old," Mrs. Dawson explained, but we thought that her problems were caused by a hearing defect.

"At that age she had an operation," Mrs. Dawson continued "and her hearing was restored but her behavior didn't improve. She'd do things like push her doll carriage, and keep pushing it right over things and into walls. That's when I began taking her to professionals for diagnosis."

## CALLED OVERPROTECTIVE

"First I took her to the Staten Island Mental Health Society. The psychiatrist who examined her just let her wander out of the office and told me to let Elizabeth be with other children. I was told that I was an overprotective mother and that nothing was wrong with my child."

"Elizabeth was enrolled in a summer Park Department program but one day she disappeared and we found out that she'd followed some children home. That was the end of that."

"I kept taking Elizabeth to one doctor after another. One guy — an assistant director at Willowbrook — told me to put her in Creedmore which is an institution for the psychiatrically disturbed."

"For a year I went through counseling. That was at a time when everyone was still telling me that nothing was wrong with my daughter, but that I had problems. Finally, after talking to mothers of brain damaged children, I took Elizabeth to a specialist in Philadelphia."

"Dr. Eugene Spitz was the first person to run an electroencephlogram on my child. He diagnosed her as having brain damage, cerebral atrophy and separation of the brain spheres. He advised me to keep her at home for as long as I could."

At first, Mrs. Dawson decided to try patterning her daughter. She put an advertisement in the paper, giving her name and address and asking for volunteers to help with the arduous patterning routine and to

"He won't tell anyone what's wrong with Elizabeth. It broke his heart when we found out she was retarded because she was his favorite child. When the ad appeared in the paper, with our names in it, he began seeing another woman."

## VISITS DOCTOR

"Even when we had to take Elizabeth to the doctor in Philadelphia, my husband refused to tell his boss why he was going. And he blames me for what's wrong with her."

"You know how it is," Mrs. Dawson explained, "when something happens you look for a reason. My husband tells me things like he never liked the doctor who delivered her or that she shouldn't have had the operation when she was three. I guess the male ego just can't accept having an imperfect child."

Mrs. Dawson last went out with her husband in 1967. Her oldest child, who missed out on a lot of attention when Elizabeth was younger, had emotional disturbances and one of her young ones has reading problems.

"I never feel that it's not worth it though," she says. "There are some days when I have to ask myself why am I doing this, but the answer is always just that Elizabeth is my child."

"All I want," Mrs. Dawson reasoned, "is someplace where I can take my daughter for a few hours a day so I can have a little time to myself to do the things I want to do."

"One thing I have to say is that I can see why people put their children away. I understand it. But I keep reminding myself that if something happened to me, I wouldn't want my family to put me in Willowbrook."

Second of four articles