

Program for multi-handicapped children is gaining ground in Willowbrook

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Lifestyle

By SHARON RAY

"You won't recognize this child in three months," said Jo Merritt, director of the Willowbrook Developmental Center's deaf and blind program.

Ms. Merritt is also team leader for Building 26 that houses 92 children, 31 of which are in the Deaf and Blind program. She, along with Mrs. Angela Trunzo, chief of serviced Unit 8, and Mrs. Fran Ryan, deputy director of treatment service, spearheads the three-year-old program.

The child Ms. Merritt referred to screams and cringes when program staff members approach her. She has just arrived in Building 26 and is beginning a training session that will last a year and teach her sign language, self-feeding, "trailing" techniques (holding on to a wall to get from one place to another), and the basics of personal hygiene.

"There are eight steps a child must learn to be toilet-trained alone," Ms. Merritt said. And each step takes quite a while to learn.

The program is due to be expanded next year to include lessons in hair-washing and preparing simple meals like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. It hopes to teach children in the program to cope with their environment at a level that may even allow them to re-enter the community.

John was fourteen when he first entered the program. He had sat in a ward his entire life and "his only response to his environment was hostility," Ms. Merritt said. Now, a year later, he knows sign language and has been accepted in the New York Institute for the Blind in the Bronx.

Blanche couldn't walk when she entered the program. It took staff members on the floor guiding her feet step by step and someone to hold her hands to teach her, but she walks now.

What makes these and other multi-handicapped children hitherto considered un-



Margaret Cruz, a psychiatric aide, left, and Jo Merritt, unit director, help a child undergoing a "dexterity experience," one of many in Willowbrook's deaf and blind program.

S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz

children were trained and two were accepted by the Institute.

Last year, 14 were trained and all were accepted, even though the Institute only had room for 10. The 10 are scheduled to leave Willowbrook Nov. 9.

Next year the program may be expanded to include a total of 72 children, when those not involved in the program are moved from Building 26.

The Deaf and Blind program is designed as "prescriptive for the child's social and physical handicaps," Ms. Merritt said, and basically consists of "exploitation of the child's previous lack of emotional stimulus." It is a 10-and-a-half-hour per day immersion plan to replace self-stimulatory behavior (that usually develops in a deaf and blind child) with social stimulation.

One segment of the training, called the socialization exercise, requires the child to "sign" his name, touch each child in the group, shake hands, and even sing.

Only some of the children accepted into the Building 26 program are totally blind and deaf. There is no light in the classrooms because "light is our biggest competition," Ms. Merritt said. She explained that children with minimal sight and hearing have "blindisms" like rubbing their eyes to produce color patterns. Such a child will be distracted from lessons by the light from uncovered windows.

In the classroom the children are given exercises to develop physical, as well as social dexterity. Physical exercises include being made to climb steps and work with a balance ball. Under close supervision the children are also taken outside to experience maneuvering on their own.

The program has received just over \$300,000 in federal and Willowbrook funding since its initiation in 1974.

Because of the program's expansion, Ms. Merritt \$150,000 in federal funds to be matched by an equal amount from

rearing of a multi-impaired and institutionalized child.

And the number of children "graduated" from the program underscores its effectiveness and may indicate just how much program improvement has been made since its initiation.

The project began in 1974 when six children were trained. One of the six was accepted for further training at the Institute.

One of the conditions for entering the Institute is that the child be sent to their own or a foster home on weekends and regular school vacations. And children from Willowbrook had not been trained social with a family environment.

In the past, these children have been