

moved into something called a Post Institutional Placement Program run by United Cerebral Palsy of New York State.

For the last year, in response to the judicial decision that mandated life for her and others like her "in the community at large," she has lived in an apartment managed by the organization in a big old prewar building on the Upper West Side, going every day to a school where she is trained to groom and feed herself. On the bureau in her bedroom there is a baby picture: bright eyes, sturdy little shoulders, a dark spit curl rising above the low forehead, a Gerber baby of a little girl.

Mrs. Ruiz put it there. She is always with her daughter now that it is possible, now that her guilt has been tempered by time and change. Mrs. Ruiz sometimes takes Maria home for the weekends. The neighbors in the Ruizes' Bronx apartment building hover around as though Leovarda was bringing a new baby home from the hospital. Maria twists her head and smiles.

"You have to wonder," said Toby Kleinhandler, who once worked at Willowbrook and is now associate director of the Post Institutional Placement Program, "what would have happened if she had had this kind of life early on."

Since Maria has been living in the

apartment, she has had many small victories. She makes eye contact with strangers, can feed herself with a special spoon and bowl and accepts hugs and praise as rewards now, rather than food. Her parents decided that they wanted to take her home. They were interviewed and questioned and assessed and evaluated.

Willowbrook was once the "providing agency" for Maria's care. Now her parents become the providers, although primary responsibility for their daughter will stay with the state, which can provide services and care Mr. and Mrs. Ruiz cannot. The parents are not opposed to entering into such a partnership; they are working people in their early 50's, and while their daughter is an infant in so many ways, her body is strong and she may outlive them.

"Now I can sleep very well with her in my house," Mrs. Ruiz said. "Because sometimes before, I go to bed and I picture things. Too many things have happened."

"I need only some other person to take her from the bath to here," she said, laying one hand on the padded arm of the wheelchair. Then she blew her daughter a noisy kiss. Maria raised her head from her chest with some difficulty and smiled the smile of the perfectly innocent.