

question of freedom versus the very real need for protection.

It is a question of "dignity of risk," according to Gerald Spielman, director of the Pouch Center.

"All adults take risks," said Spielman. "But the question of allowing the mentally retarded to take risks is very difficult for professionals, and not without reason. People can be taken advantage of, hurt or lost. Still, the retarded person can also be taught responsibility. Then the limitations become individualized rather than stereotypes imposed on a group."

Yet who is qualified to make those decisions on individual limitations? "Does the group home staff have the discretion to make sophisticated choices on when to take risks?" said Mrs. Greenbaum. "It's a fine line on what to do. Normalization is still an ideal."

Questions surrounding normalization become particularly tricky when dealing with issues like sex, marriage and parenting.

That the mentally retarded have a sexuality has only been acknowledged and addressed in recent years, and there is now a movement to provide sex education for moderately and mildly retarded adolescents and adults.

"The new philosophy is not

necessarily to endorse sexual intercourse for the retarded, but to acknowledge that these people do have sexual feelings and to teach them how to cope with that," said Mrs. Greenbaum. "That means teaching them how to say no, and some values clarification."

It is also necessary to provide simple, straightforward information for the protection of the retarded adult. One professional told the story of a young retarded woman who was talked into sex and never realized the meaning of the act. The woman blithely explained that her mother told her never to let a man touch her breasts or her legs, and the man involved did not do that.

As for marriage, Mrs. Greenbaum notes that statistics show that marriages between mentally retarded partners are no more likely to end in divorce than marriage between people of average intelligence.

"I think marriage for the mentally retarded is generally a good experience," she said. "It gives them the same fulfillment as the average person, and they can maintain the marriage with support services."

The question of retarded persons raising children becomes more complicated. Studies indicate that children in such homes often lack proper stimulation,

that parents lack coping skills and the economic burdens are often oppressive. Many professionals advocate counseling programs for mentally retarded couples to point out the difficulties of parenting and explain the option of remaining childless.

But in the end, most professionals agree, these decisions should not be forced on the mentally retarded.

"If there is a difference in philosophy now, it is that we are looking at the whole person," said Joan Hodum of Staten Island Aid. "I think the word I really like to emphasize is habilitation, to life and for life, and that means more than screwing together pens in a workshop. It's the whole world of socialization and building as many strengths in the person as possible."

"The issue, of course, is freedom," said Dr. Burton Blatt, the keynote speaker at a recent Manhattan conference on the mentally retarded.

"Our main goal was never to help the individual get a better job or achieve at a higher grade level. While all these matters are terribly important, it's not the issue. The issue was always freedom."

*(This is the last in a series of six articles.)*