

At SIDC, Peter awaits move into group home

Peter Montessani was born a twin, the youngest of nine children. Almost right away, his family found him "different." He was unable to chew, unable to walk. He experienced a series of medical problems, including a heart condition that still plays a major factor in his life.

As he grew older, he threw temper tantrums and didn't like to play others. He was enrolled in a nursery school, but the school eventually told his parents to take him out because his behavior was too disruptive.

The diagnosis was Down's syndrome, a congenital disability which in Montessani's case resulted in profound retardation (his IQ measures less than 20) and physically disabilities.

In 1949, at the age of 2, Montessani was admitted to the newly opened Willowbrook State School. He has lived there ever since.

There is no way of knowing how Montessani feels about his 36 years at Willowbrook or about the changes the facility has undergone. There is no way to ask whether he wants to move into a group home. Although Montessani is considered to be "verbal," his vocabulary is confined to words like "yes," "no" and "bye-bye"; his understanding is likewise limited.

Yet Montessani is alert and aware of his environment. When he was recently moved to another ward, he cried. Most of the time, he displays a cheery disposition that has made him a staff favorite.

His days are clearly defined. He spends about six hours a day in programming, where he works on goals like learning to tie his shoes and eating more slowly. In his free time, he likes looking at pictures in magazines. On weekends, there are often organized recreational activities. "He loves to dance, he loves music. He loves to go out on trips," says Joanne Parker, his primary therapist.

It sounds simplistic, but the



Dolly Caldwell, mental hygiene therapist aide, explains pictures in a magazine to Peter Montessani.

Willowbrook staff say that Montessani's life now is no doubt much more satisfying than it was before the consent decree. In the old days, persons with Montessani's disabilities were given almost no kind of programming, says Dolores Mason, a supervisor for treatment programs in Montessani's complex. "People with his kind of disabilities got custodial care and not much else."

But now, even profoundly retarded persons at SIDC are given toilet-training and taught to feed themselves, among other skills. "Peter's become more of a person" as a result of the consent decree, Ms. Mason says. "His IQ hasn't increased, of course, but there are so many other ways in which to grow,

ways in which people like Peter can live a more comfortable, happier life."

But while Montessani has benefited from the consent decree, he will benefit more when he leaves the institution and moves into a group home, Ms. Parker says.

"He can do a lot of things for himself, like even make his bed, and I think he really benefits from a group home atmosphere," she said. "It would also be nice for him to be with higher-functioning clients. He's higher functioning than a lot of the people here, so he sort of stays to himself a lot.

"I like having him here — he's my baby," Ms. Parker said. "But a group home would be the best thing for him."