

Jennifer's condition may put her 'more at a loss'

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Psychiatrists at the Staten Island Institute for Basic Research in Willowbrook said Jennifer Schweiger, a Westerleigh girl with Down's syndrome who has been missing for a week, could be under more stress than a normal child because of her disability.

"The threshold of anxiety and the attention span in Down's people is much shorter than people without Down's, so the individual with Down's who is under stress is more at a loss," said Dr. Henry Wisniewski, director of the institute, which is located on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center.

"Faced with a new situation, it takes them longer to familiarize themselves with the new situation or new people," he said. Down's people experience "a great fluctuation in the emotions, which adds tremendously to the stress she's undergoing."

The higher Jennifer's level of functioning is, the better her ability to cope with the stress will be, Wisniewski said.

Based on information from Jennifer's family that she has the intellectual level of a 7-year-old, Dr. Krystyna Wisniewski said Jennifer is moderately retarded and therefore educable.

"She can tell her name and address," said Dr. Wisniewski, associate director of clinical services at the institute and Wisniewski's wife.

Down's children are "very sweet, very sociable, very attached to the family, and if they become detached from the family, they become depressed. They get so scared. She could be extremely frightened," she said.

An extra concern, Dr.

Wisniewski said, is that some Down's children "are more prone to infection" than children without Down's.

Jennifer was a recent graduate of the special education program at PS 22 in Graniteville. A neighbor of the Schweigers, Mary Lastella, said the girl functioned relatively well on her own and could dress herself, feed herself, communicate and play with other children.



An Emergency Services Unit police officer tears opens a plastic garbage bag.