

Dear Caregiver,

You don't know me, even though you spend many hours of your life with me. Sometimes you look at me and still don't see me. My life is very different from yours; you have friends, family and acquaintances. Few people talk to me at all except to order me around. Rarely does anybody take the time to become my friend. You go to many different places and do many interesting things. You see many things I'll probably never get to see. My life is contained within the walls of this building you call a group home. Oh, sometimes I can go to the store (if I'm good) and I go to the workshop where you make me do things I don't understand. My life is very limited.

My world makes no sense. I'm often confused, frightened and lonely. People touch me only to guide me to some place, to make me do things that have no meaning for me. When hands reach out for me, they grab me and force me to hold things or to move things. Sometimes they just keep my hands from moving. When I get upset, I will hit, push, throw things, or even hurt myself. I have no other way to tell you how I feel. I use these things to tell you my feelings and to make you go away. When I do, I am usually held down by several people until I give up.

My feelings are just as real as yours. Won't you try to understand me? I'm a person too. I can't participate and enjoy being with you when I'm scared and confused by you. I need to feel safe, and my world has to make sense to me.

Why don't you talk to me? Tell me stories and share your life experiences with me. I may not understand your words, but I know the difference in the sounds of your voice. I can tell when people like me and accept me, just like I know when people don't like me and being around me is job. I don't know how to be with other people. I'm not a behavior problem, just a frightened, lonely person who needs to learn how to interact with other people. How can I learn that it's good to be with you if you grab me, hold me, restrain me, and put me in empty rooms by myself? It doesn't make sense to me. I don't need you to control me - I need a friend, I need a home.

I am not a machine, and I am not an animal. Don't pop M & M's and cheese-balls in my mouth! Don't talk to me like you are a robot; all day I hear you tell me things like, "Sit down!", "Stop!", "Good Job!", "Don't!", and "We don't act like that!" This is not normal! Be real with me.

Please remember this letter the next time I throw things, hit or spit. I'm not bad, just scared and confused. Treat me like you would treat a friend, a brother, a sister, your child. Reassure me. Give me something to hold on to that makes sense to me. Be my friend, and see the pain and fear in my eyes. Show me that there is some goodness in this world.

A person with mental retardation