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A Family's experience of The National Portage Association's Conference 2011.

Well it couldn't have been simpler to get to the Northampton Hilton, just off junction 15 of the M1. We flew down on a sunny, blue skied afternoon just after lunch. The car was filled with a Shabang! Soundtrack (the brain boosters CD this trip). It felt like we were going on a short break, something glamorous and filled with anticipation. We hadn't been able to believe our luck when we'd found out we had been drawn to go as family delegates from Kirklees!

When we pulled into the car park, a portage member of staff wheeled over a luggage trolley as though she'd been waiting just for us, all smiles and welcoming banter. The hotel was modern and spacious, with a pool and gym. It was reserved entirely for the Portage conference and this made it feel safer and simultaneously more relaxed. The welcoming staff registered us and made us feel very welcome as though we'd met before, especially Ben and Tess. It was a genuinely family orientated weekend.

Our luggage (which was excessive even for a family of four) was wheeled down to the room for us. This was spacious with two king size beds and a cot for Tess. All families had been sited on the ground floor down a particular corridor which made it convenient for the restaurant, relaxation areas, crèche and seminar rooms. Once settled in the room, we ventured out for it was dinner time already.

The Hilton staff were excellent, and the portage organisers had thought of our every need. There was a selection of foods in a hot buffet style arrangement for adults and separate area nearer to the tables for the children's food. Fruit and yogurts were freely available, dinner included healthy options - chicken, fish, vegetables etc but also chips and nuggets and more child friendly options. Water and juice, coffee/tea and biscuits again in plentiful supply and we were able to get soya milk too for Ben.

After dinner there was an opening welcome speech and seminar. It took me all evening to get Ben and Tess to fall asleep, finally exhausted by their new experience, they were sooooo excited so I never made it to the welcome address, but John did (and had a few beers with other parents while he was at it). The word conference implies that it might be intense and work like but all the sessions were accessible, non-academic and certainly not intimidating. The three I picked (in addition to the Keynote speakers) were actually fun, moving and gave some future ideas for what we could organise for our kids (Ballet/dance being a particular skill that aides poise and confidence). I would have liked to have attended more seminars but time and logistics would not allow.

Whilst at the seminars, Ben and Tess and the other children were in two rooms "yellow" and "red" which were designated as the crèche rooms. They took to the portage staff well and seemed happy and thoroughly played out when we collected them to go for lunch and a children's tea on the Saturday. This time I was able to get them settled. Tess started snoring moments after being put down in her cot, Ben as always took a little longer but we made it in time for a drink before going through to the large conference room for a sit down "formal" dinner at around 7.30pm ish. We even had a bit of a dance in the "disco" too! I sat next to our lovely portage worker and on the other side of John sat two parents who had given one of the seminars, one a university lecturer in Psychology the other in sociology with three children, their six year old having Down Syndrome. We chatted about our experiences of finding out about our children's D.S and other people's questions, about what potential we felt they had and the sorts of intelligence we had noticed emerging all the

time. It was a very positive conversation, interesting and informed and I went away feeling yes, giving Ben as many varying experiences in his life is key to finding out what he enjoys and has potential for but also that we are on the right track by seeing his development as something that benefits from an holistic approach. And of course having two children with D.S means subsequently trying this approach with Tess too.

The whole experience was very much about the families being just as important if not more so than the professionals. It was an extremely well organised conference which was relaxed, warm and friendly. We also got to take B and T for a swimming lesson as the NPA had organised two instructors to be present in the pool at given times. There were SEN toy stalls all along the corridor where the seminars were so it was fun trying to get interested kids past these without picking up everything in sight and wanting to take it home, and I don't just mean the children either!

At the end of the conference there was a particularly moving talk by a poet, writer, trainer who is also disabled. She spoke of her experience as a child and of the love bestowed on her by her parents. She included written pieces from friends who had attended a special school and the variety of early experiences these people with disabilities had of education and home life. She ended her talk with the relationship of parents and children with disabilities and the importance of nurturing self-esteem, a sense of being loved. She then read a poem she'd written for her father, the sentiment being her gratitude for his unswerving pride in her. There wasn't a dry eye in the room and a couple of parents had to leave hastily at that point.

We then collected our very much loved and special children, had a lovely lunch, said our goodbyes, thanked to the organisers, and headed home on an equally sunny and blue-skied day.

If you get the chance to go - do! It was a great experience.

Bernie Egan