

The Pre-5 Service: Portage

A Home Teaching Service For Children With Developmental Delay

What is Portage?

Portage is a home teaching service for pre-school children who show some degree of developmental delay. The children may have delay because of a specific condition such as Cerebral Palsy or Down Syndrome, or there may be no obvious difficulty for the fact that physical or intellectual development is delayed.

The service helps parents/carers to teach their own children in their own homes with support from a trained home visitor who visits the family at the same time on the same day each week. In Wakefield there are currently 6 Home Visitors (4 of whom work part time), and they are managed by a Senior Educational Psychologist.

Portage was developed in the town of Portage, USA, in 1966. The progress that children made as a result of Portage involvement was so successful that there are now Portage Services in many countries across the world.

How does the Service work?

Most referrals of these young children are through Health Authority staff such as Health Visitors and Paediatricians. However, the service operates an open referral system and parents/carers are encouraged to self-refer – and they do! Upon receipt of a referral the Senior Educational psychologist visits the family to ensure that they are clear what the Portage Service can offer them and to establish that the child is suitable for Portage Service involvement. Once the child and family have been allocated a Portage Home Visitor, the parents/carers and Home Visitor work together to establish what the child can already do using the Portage Checklist as a guide and to work out together what skills the child is ready to learn. A teaching plan for a 3 – 4 month period is planned and agreed between the Portage Home Visitor and the parents/carers. Each teaching plan is tailored to the individual needs of the child concerned and takes full account of the parents hopes for their child's learning.

In some cases, Portage children are in full day care as parents/carers work full time. In this case, the child will still be offered a Portage place, but the main support will be through an identified key worker in the child's day care setting. Liaison with the parents will ensure that they are kept fully aware of all the Portage plans and can continue the work during the weekends and holidays.

Who does the teaching?

It is the parents/carers who do the teaching as they spend the most time with their child, they know the child best and they have the greatest influence on the child's early years. During the weekly home visit, the Portage Home Visitor demonstrates how to teach the new skill as well as how to observe and record the child's progress. The teaching activity for the week is then written down clearly on an Activity Chart. The parents try out the activity during the home visit and then spend a small amount of time each day teaching the child the skill that has been recorded on the activity chart.

The emphasis is on these teaching sessions being enjoyable and they can usually be included in the child's normal routine or play. Other members of the family, including brothers and sisters, are encouraged to help if they wish. The child's progress is discussed with the home visitor during every visit and the next step in the teaching programme is planned.

Portage is a partnership between parents/carers and the home visitor in which the parents can gain the skills and confidence to teach their own children.

Who are the Home Visitors and who else is involved?

The home visitors have varied backgrounds and have received special training in Portage. Weekly supervision meetings are held to celebrate the children's success and to enable the home visitor to report back on their progress, as well as to gain useful ideas from each other!

Regular meetings are also held with other professionals who may be working with the child, such as Speech and Language Therapists, Physiotherapists and Occupational Therapists and Teachers for Visual Impairment or Hearing Impairment.

The benefits of Portage

Portage is an early intervention educational resource and provides information about skill levels and the rate at which the child is able to learn. This can form a base of knowledge which can help parents and professional advise the LEA about the child's educational needs for the next stage of their education.

The main feature of Portage is that the "parents are partners" in their child's education and development.

Many parents/carers have found the Portage approach very helpful because of its positive emphasis that children **can** learn new skills and for the practical way it tackles the important questions of "what shall I teach/" and "how shall I teach it?"

The families also value the weekly support they receive as a result of the regular visits, particularly if there is no extended family living close by.

The service also establishes links between parents through organised parents events such as coffee mornings, Christmas parties and a summer outing.

Who can be considered for Portage?

Any family living within the Wakefield Metropolitan District Council area and who has a child with developmental delay who is not in receipt of any other funded education provision. The family must be prepared to make the necessary commitment to the weekly visits, to carry out the daily teaching activities and to complete the weekly activity charts.

Other considerations

The service delivers regular training – the Basic Portage Workshop, which is advertised in the Inset Brochure. This is very valuable training for any adults working with young children with developmental difficulties, but particularly for those working in early year's settings where there is child who has been in receipt of Portage services. Many nursery staff have found the training invaluable for their work generally.