

2007 National Excellence In Teaching Awards

State and Territory Teaching Excellence Award Recipient



Toni Kirby

Diploma of Teaching (Early Childhood)

Twin Towns Community Kindergarten and Preschool, Coolangatta, Queensland

Nominated by: School parent

Position: Early Childhood Teacher • Level taught: Early Childhood • School type: Independent • Town: Coolangatta • Category: Early Childhood • State: QLD

Fostering preschoolers' enthusiasm and desire for learning

As Director of Twin Towns Community Kindergarten, Toni Kirby says that "witnessing how tiny everyday actions ripple out and change a child's life" is what fuels her passionate enthusiasm for teaching young preschoolers. Toni's overriding aim is that when her students leave the kindergarten they will be well prepared and enthusiastic to take on the challenges of the more formal learning at school.

Students in Toni's classes benefit from a wide range of open-ended learning experiences and a negotiated curriculum. *Thought Books* are written each week for the children as a way of documenting their feelings, ideas, challenges, and achievements. Constructive, experiential play also fosters the children's desire for knowledge; whether it be making clay dinosaur fossils, or spending a day as archaeologists searching for 'lost' Egyptian artefacts.

Home visits are a vital part of Toni's curriculum. She feels these visits – undertaken after hours in her own time – offer students invaluable one-on-one attention from their teacher in their own home environment. The home visits, and indeed most of the kindergarten's activities, utilise digital profiling. Through this profiling, the observations and experiences of the children are recorded on digital cameras, then collated and printed out to form a lasting record of the child's achievements.

Insight

Q: In your opinion, what makes a good teacher?

A: One who is willing to learn alongside the children and families, is creative, open-minded and also compassionate. A good teacher looks beyond each student's face and sees inside his or her soul.

Q: How do you maintain your enthusiasm for teaching?

A: My enthusiasm is driven by young children's natural curiosity and enthusiasm to learn. They want to know the how, when, where and whys!

Q: In hindsight, what do you wish your training provided you with more of?

A: I was quite happy with my training. Eventually you have to get out into the real world and just do it and make the most of your practicum and build a support network.

Q: What is the most difficult aspect of teaching today?

A: Multi-tasking and the growing diversity of the teacher's role, including time management and knowing when to close the door at the end of a school day.

Q: What is your greatest challenge as a teacher?

A: To create a stimulating learning environment for young children and share this journey with them and their family. To remember that challenges can be a positive influence on your work.

Q: How has teaching changed over the years?

A: There is more reliance on the ability to multi-task. Also, we now 'light the fire' rather than 'fill the vessel'. We look to build the qualities needed for the future, not just the skills.

Q: What is the single most important thing you, as a teacher, can do to connect with individual students?

A: Respect and learn about the environment and family they come from. I personally value home visits to build this important relationship.

Q: If you were the Minister for Education, Science and Training for a week, what would you try to change?

A: Increase the funding to community based kindergarten and preschools so teachers' wages become fully funded and allowance is made to pay an administrator and ancillary staff in centres.

Q: What keeps you awake at night?

A: As an early childhood teacher, you play hard and sleep well, usually. However, I do lose some sleep over our future direction on the impact of the prep year on community kindergartens and families.

Q: If your students could describe you in three words, what would they say?

A: My friend, storyteller and exciting - taken from their words in Christmas cards.

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