



## Leo Prendergast

Director, Rainbow Children's Centre, Ballina (NSW)



I completed a degree in Early Childhood Education at Sydney University in 1980. I then worked as a teacher and director in a range of children's services for six years before being invited to establish an extended hours service at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) in 1987. I worked there for 16 years during which time UTS developed five different childcare centres and two out of school hours care (OOSHC) services. I coordinated all of these services. While at UTS, I completed a Masters in Public Sector Management specialising in community management. As well, I taught part time at TAFE Colleges and the University of Western Sydney (UWS) in early childhood education on programming, planning and management. I moved to the North Coast of New South Wales in 2003 and I am now the Director of Rainbow Children's Centre providing long day care, OOSHC and early intervention for children with disabilities and additional needs.

*Having worked in the sector for almost three decades, how do you maintain your passion and commitment to the early childhood sector?*

I think children have done it for me. I still wonder at young children and how they learn. I still love every day to talk and play with children and see the joy and satisfaction as they learn and master their world. I can't imagine a more satisfying job.

I think engagement in the sector more broadly has also been really important. I got involved in Community Child Care and NACBCS very early in my career. First I got to meet and be involved with colleagues and other teachers and became aware of issues and the broader perspective of how children's services fit within the community. I have found that essential and I think it has helped my decision-making to have that broader perspective. I also have found it personally satisfying to make some contribution to the sector as a whole and so have continued. Where I live now Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is quite strong and so I make my contribution mainly through that organisation. I think as an experienced 'professional' making that type of contribution, beyond my actual job, should be an expectation.

I have also found teaching in universities and TAFE colleges is motivating, although it has never been the focus of my career. I think when you have to teach another adult you first have to really reflect on your own practice and that is never a bad thing.

I don't feel OK giving advice. I can only say this is the way it has been for me. If there is any value for others to hear those things, then it's OK. I also have not spoken at all about being a male. I have never really seen that as either an advantage or a drawback. I don't know if it has influenced my leadership—again maybe that is for others to judge. I just get on with doing my job and being who I am and I find my gender seems irrelevant.

*How do you execute your vision and strategic plans as a centre leader?*

I tend to think that as a leader I have to have families, management and staff with me. While occasionally as a leader I have to strike out on my own, so to speak, that has to be rare. Mostly, I take the view that if the vision and plans I want to implement have value, then it is my responsibility to persuade others by the force of my arguments—not the force of my position. Of course once you achieve some success it becomes easier to persuade others, as people begin to trust your judgment.

*Please describe briefly an example of a big leadership moment in your career and explain what you learnt about leadership from this experience?*

I remember a staff person in her appraisal discussion telling me she waited for the first year or so with me as Director for me to explode and blame her for problems. She said all her life that had been her experience of what leaders do and she almost could not believe I would not do so. This really reinforced for me my ideas of rights/responsibilities. If I expect a staff member to take responsibilities I want her to be able and empowered to make decisions. But I also have to give her the right to make those decisions. I must be prepared to back her even when she makes a different decision to what I may have done. Rather than blaming a team member if something goes wrong, that is the time they most need my support. If they continue to get that support they will develop the skills to be good decision-makers. If, instead I blame and berate staff for a poor decision, I could encourage a team that procrastinates, passes all decisions back to me and makes my job as leader so much harder.