

Dinosaurs! *The ultimate learning tool*

By Mark Smalley

There are certain givens in life: 1) In Golf, the ball is never closer than it appears from far away; 2) The minute you buy a top-of-the-line computer, a new, more powerful one will be out at a lower cost in six months; 3) Children are fascinated by dinosaurs. The big creatures are simply irresistible to little ones of all ages.

The reasons are really basic when we consider the young human mind. Eventually, we tell the kids there are no ghosts, monsters, dragons, vampires, werewolves, Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, and Tooth Fairy, Etc. You name it — Big Foot, Loch Ness Monster, Yeti — they don't exist. Dinosaurs? Oh sure, yes — they exist. Look at these bones. In



fact, look at these teeth and eggs. Dinosaurs are perhaps the best of all worlds — they were huge and frightening; the earth thundered when they walked. They fought battles between viscous meat-eaters and peaceful plant-eaters. Of course, the best thing about these prehistoric monsters are that they are all dead. No "boogie-man," no bad dreams. The perfect beast to be in totally awe of and not have to worry about being eaten by. Kids love them, and they are not alone.

We have done school presentations and birthday parties for four years in the Charlotte area. I am consistently amazed at the reception we receive — not just from the children, but from the adults as well. It is said, the three

stages of your life you will know the most about Dinosaurs is at ages 6-10, 30-40, and 65-75; or more precisely — when you are a child, when you have children, and when you have grandchildren — and you are drawn once again to the behemoths.

Teachers and parents can take advantage of these passions in a couple of ways. They can use the history of dinosaurs and really allow children to open up. Dinosaurs truly are one area of science that can be pushed along with creativity and open-mindedness. There is so much that comes from the fossil record that is speculation:

- 1) Colors for example — green, gray, purple, bright, dull, invisible. Scientists have no idea what color the dinosaurs were.
- 2) Sounds? What did they sound like? They have some clues, but the whole field is wide open.
- 3) Behavior? Based on what? They try to piece together scenes from track-ways and skeletons, but in the end, they can't tell if the fossils they are studying occurred at the same time or thousands of years apart.

The fact of the matter is, a child really can't be proven wrong. It is an excellent time to present fossils, and let the kids tell you what they mean to them. You can get creativity, sure; you can also teach some of the logic used by scientists to deduce some of the theories they have come up with. The reasoning, the math, the anatomy, geography, geology, biology — all of these tools were used to come up with current dinosaur theories. Not to mention, trial and

error. I would have to say, honestly, that Paleontology has made its fair share of mistakes. Who wouldn't, when all of the evidence has been in the ground for eons? As I tell the kids, "Rocks don't come with owners manuals." Even so, when you



watch *Discovery* and listen to a Paleontologist tell you they recreated an eco-system 65 million years old — remember what I said about learning the most at 6-10, 30-40, and 65-75. One of the reasons why 30-40 and 65-75 year-olds are fascinated, is because everything they are hearing is new. The scientists before had it all wrong. Now, scientists today think they have it all figured out.

Or do they?

Take the big theories they have now. One, is that an asteroid destroyed all life on the planet about 65 million years ago. Okay, let's accept that as fact. We take our science book and flip to the next chapter. It says here birds are evolved from dinosaurs. Okay now, is it just me, or doesn't anyone else think that things that are destroyed are not likely to evolve? Logically, these two theories conflict. So, if scientists today are having these problems and can't even determine if T-REX is a fast predator or a slow scavenger, wouldn't it be a perfect area to let the children "go for it?" Because the study of dinosaurs can be compared to so many aspects of life, it's not the outcome, it's the chase.

Mark Smalley and his wife, Jodi, own Dino-Star, the fossil and space store in Charlotte, NC.

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