

EDUCATION



PBN PHOTO/STEPHANIE EWENS

**EVOLVING THEORIES:** Kate Miller developed a line of toys to help teach children – including her own – Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution.

# Teaching Darwin’s theory is child’s play for Miller

BY DENISE PERREAU  
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When Kate Miller’s two young sons developed a fascination for dinosaurs, she thought their interest would be a perfect way to teach them about Charles Darwin, the theory of evolution and natural selection, if only she could find the educational toys and games to do so.

But she couldn’t.

She looked everywhere on the Internet, found all sorts of toys related to just about every other branch of science, from chemistry to physics, biology to astronomy. She checked with toy stores, museums, educators, libraries, to no avail. She herself is a scientist with three academic degrees, including a doctorate in demography, so she knew

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**KATE MILLER**  
Charlie’s Playhouse owner

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where to look and what to look for. “I found tons of stuff for adults, but few books for kids,” she said, “and nothing for kids that explores the concept of evolution.”

So, she created her own business, Charlie’s Playhouse, and a line of products to teach children the wonders of evolution. “I can’t even express to you how dazzling this story is,” she said of evolution. “Kids just love it.”

She started selling her products online in October and seldom a day goes by without “a handful of orders” in her email, she said. She has shipped to the United Kingdom and Australia, Norway and Canada.

At the heart of Miller’s product line is the “illustrated Walk-On Play Mat,” suggested for children ages 4 to 10 years old. The mat is about 2 feet wide and 18 feet long, covered in durable but stiff plastic, that can be laid on the floor or propped up to make walls for children to play within. When all folded up, it is no bigger than a coffee table book.

The mat actually is a timeline, with colorful drawings of 67 different creatures and easy-to-read text that tell the story of evolution from 600 million years ago to today. “Squishy” amorphous organisms start the timeline, progressing to creatures with fins, and then wings, and lastly legs. Over time, the creatures move from the water to the land. Humans arrive on the scene only in the last six inches or so, a point that Miller said astounds children. On the back of the mat are suggested activities and games for kids to play. Miller’s other products include a deck of learning cards and a poster version of the timeline mat.

The Cleveland Museum of Natural History now stocks her products. She has also reached out to like-minded bloggers, to parents and even to the clergy in Rhode Island. She offered local pastors an evolutionary timeline if they would like to include evolution in their sermons and, so far, five have accepted, she said. She’s been invited to speak at humanist and educational conferences, and she recently compiled reviews of more than 90 books – “all the books I could find,” she said – about Darwin and evolution, dating back to the 1960s. So far, 3,500 people have downloaded her packet of book reviews from her Web site, named for Darwin, [www.charliesplayhouse.com](http://www.charliesplayhouse.com).

Miller was scheduled to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Darwin’s birth on Feb. 15, three days after the actual birth date, with a party at her business’ studio in the Hope Artiste Village, Pawtucket, complete with a cake and “survival of the fittest” Ping-Pong competition.

Miller, a Providence resident, says she learned about evolution as a child and, to her, it’s “like teaching about gravity.”

“There are connections between understanding evolution and the history of life, and how we behave in our everyday lives,” she said. “For example, the environment. Only by understanding our place on this earth can we understand how to handle environmental problems. You may as well ask why it’s important for a child to know the history of the United States. In order to understand yourself as a creature walking on this planet, you have to know where you came from.”