



Interview | Judi Coffey: Rainbow and the InvestiGator Club

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Judi Coffey began her educational publishing career as a freelance writer in 1978, and by 1985, her clients and business had grown so much that Judi and her husband, James, founded Rainbow Educational Concepts as a full-service development house. Splashed on Rainbow's [Web pages](#) and business cards is their motto, "Content is everything." Judi attributes Rainbow's long-term success to a loyal and solid team of employees and freelancers. Loyal indeed! Most of Rainbow's employees and clients, and even many freelancers, have been working steadily with the company for over twenty-five years. "We have a remarkable team that builds deep and lasting relationships," says Judi. "Once we establish a relationship, whether with a freelancer or a client, something clicks, and that person wants to keep working with us forever." With its small but mighty team, Rainbow consistently manages the largest and most innovative projects in the industry. Through collaborations with other leaders in design, technology, and video production, Rainbow remains flexible and able to handle any type or size of project with a calmness that puts clients at ease and products at top market shares. "One of our clients recently described us as a

'boutique' developer as opposed to a 'big box' store. Another describes us as 'masters of project management.'" In the rest of this interview, Judi goes on to describe how her mission evolved in recent years to include the establishment of another company, Robert-Leslie Publishing, dedicated to the creation of an entirely new learning concept for early childhood, but with broader implications for all learners, The InvestiGator Club® Inquiry-Based Learning System.

**Imagination, curiosity, and creativity
are essential to learning.**

Victor: What is Robert-Leslie Publishing? What is the story behind that?



Judi: For over twenty years, Rainbow had built a strong reputation as a dependable and high-quality developer. We had always worked on multiple grade levels, preK-12, but I think our gravitation towards early childhood somehow shined through. When a major publisher expressed a serious interest in merging with Rainbow so that we could become their early childhood department, we realized that we had developed a valuable and marketable expertise. We had powerful ideas about how to create truly outstanding early childhood products, and we wanted to give it a try. Instead of pursuing the merger, we decided in 2005, to form a new company, Robert-Leslie Publishing, The Early Childhood Company®, to create and publish our own products. That left Rainbow to continue serving our clients in the K-12 market, while allowing us to fully explore and create the kinds of early childhood products we wanted to produce on our own.

Victor: Why did you create The InvestiGator Club?



Judi: We created The InvestiGator Club because we saw a serious need for early childhood learning products that respect young children and build upon their natural curiosity about the world and their place in it. We also wanted to create a program that teachers would be excited to use and that parents would love. Essentially, we wanted a “club” that included the key people in a child’s life, because we know that when parents and teachers work cooperatively, children’s learning is dramatically improved.

Victor: What does the name mean?

Judi: Well, here’s the story as told in our first book, Dilly and The InvestiGator Club and in our theme song. Cordelia “Dilly” Gator® and her family live in a houseboat on Triangle Beach. One day, Dilly and her younger brother, JT Gator®, go for a walk in Circle Forest with Great Auntie Lu®. They come upon a giant oak tree and decide to gather all their friends – Rosalita Sausalita® and Manny Salamander® from City Square, and Chuck Wood® and Bruno Buzzbee® from Circle Forest – to build a tree house in the oak tree. When they climb the tree house ladder and look around at the big wide world below them, they decide to form The InvestiGator Club to solve mysteries and investigate their world. You can meet the characters on The InvestiGator Club’s [YouTube page](#).

Victor: What is it? Who created it?

Judi: The InvestiGator Club Prekindergarten Learning System is a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate, fully integrated preschool curriculum for children ages 3-5. This award-winning program is organized into seven inquiry-based Investigations, each based on a science theme, such as water, plants, animals, or health. Children develop skills through “purposeful inquiry” as they join the characters to investigate the real world.

Both the Rainbow and Robert-Leslie Publishing teams were involved in the creation of The InvestiGator Club from start to finish. Our authors, Beth Alley Wise and Joellyn Cicciarelli, worked hand-in-hand with writers, editors, designers, artists, puppet makers, software developers and a host of vendors and subcontractors to create an extraordinary pre-K learning system.

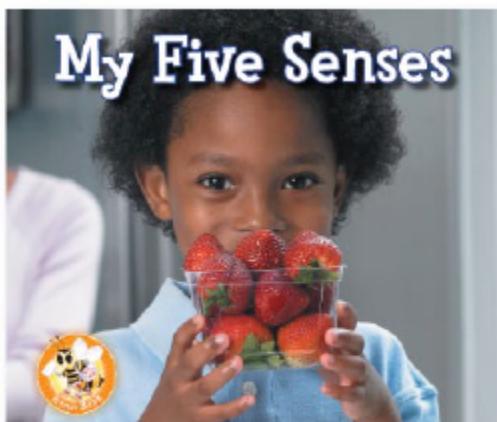


The InvestiGator Club® Prekindergarten System

We invited several world-renowned early childhood researchers to join our team. Our senior advisors and authors of [the program's research base](#), Dr. Craig T. Ramey and Dr. Sharon L. Ramey were the founding directors of the Georgetown University Center on Health and Education. Literacy and Assessment Advisor, Dr. Timothy Shanahan was the chairman of the National Early Literacy Panel and the author of the NELP research report released in 2009. More recently, Ellen Galinsky contributed to the program with her book, Mind in the Making, and a foreword to our new Professional Development Guide.

Victor: What does it do? What are the benefits?

Judi: With The InvestiGator Club, it's really the kids, not the product, who "do" things. They play, sing, dance, read, draw, create, listen, ask questions, think critically, count, solve problems, explore, gather data, make connections, discuss, use their imaginations, appreciate art, experiment, write, and share what they learn. The learning in this program is robust, with an ambitious scope and sequence that covers 274 measurable outcomes in ten learning domains and a highly advanced assessment system that allows teachers to carefully monitor each child's progress and follow through with individualized intervention strategies. The program provides a critical learning path and all the tools teachers need to set up an ideal environment for children to learn through rich storytelling, meaningful conversations with peers and adults, and active hands-on experiences in math and science.



Bruno's Buzz Science Reader

The power of The InvestiGator Club is that little investigators are happy, curious, and excited to be learning the way they learn best. And this is learning that sticks. Everyone is welcome and gets involved in an InvestiGator Club classroom. We see administrators, parents, teachers, and children working together to create murals of Dilly's World on the classroom walls, build Investigation Stations, celebrate Investigations, and make sure every pre-K minute is a valuable one. I wish everyone could visit an InvestiGator Club classroom in action to really appreciate [the benefits of this program](#).

How is it unique from other similar products? What companies do you see in the same space?

Judi: The InvestiGator Club is the only preschool curriculum built on an inquiry-based model that introduces scientific thinking to very young children in an intuitive and comfortable way. We approach real-life learning differently than the crowd – we have created this imaginary world with animal characters that kids can relate to and environments that help children build backgrounds that they might not otherwise experience. For example, a child in rural Alaska or in urban Manhattan might not experience the world of 'Triangle Beach' in their life. You might think that since it is important to build on children's background, stories about the beach should not be presented. We think the opposite. We start with the premise that everything is new to a three- or four-year old. So, we create imaginary

worlds and characters. Through our stories and art and songs, we build background and create a context where learning can occur for all children. It's non-threatening. The characters possess a range of traits and abilities that all children can relate to. We've yet to find a child, or an adult for that matter, who doesn't almost immediately identify her favorite character. So, then we move from this pretend world into investigating the real world. Children progress from a make-believe story about the beach to experimenting with sand and water to talking about photos of real beaches to dictating stories based on their own experiences or imagination.

Flapboards® in each Investigation are interactive storytelling tools grounded in extensive research and testing. Literacy, science, and math stories are told through a colorful set of storyboards, with a hidden item behind each flap. Children use problem solving and reasoning skills to figure out the story and what will happen next. The trick is that the Flap Fillers® are interchangeable and magnetic. So, by changing the script and the picture behind the flap, the teacher can turn a math story into a literacy story and challenge children's thinking even more. Each Flapboard comes with write-on/wipe-off blank Flap Fillers, so that [children can create their own stories](#). Flapboards are also available as e-Flapboards.



Flapboard® and Flap Fillers®

Regarding the second part of your question, I think this is a particularly exciting time to be in early childhood education because of all of the great companies and people in this space. I am a collaborator at heart, so I initiate a lot of partnerships with other companies that create complementary products or services to make learning even better for young children. I believe that we're all in this together, and I truly enjoy working with the other companies in this industry.

Victor: When was it developed? What is something interesting or relevant about its development history?

Judi: I could track this development history back to early college days if I wanted to be literal, but we started the actual development of this particular product in 2004 and had our first products available

for sale in 2006. I have to add that the thinking, planning, and researching for what evolved into The InvestiGator Club started in 2001.

The most interesting, certainly the most fun, part of the development process was the nonstop brainstorming meetings to come up with our “story,” the characters, and the settings. The characters became very real to us. Someone would suggest something that Rosalita Sausalita might say in a particular situation, and someone else would object strenuously, saying, “Rosalita would never say a thing like that.” We came to know the characters like our own children, what they would say, what they would do in any given situation. And, we would argue about it until we got it right.

Victor: Where can you get the program? How much does it cost? What are the options?

Judi: There are different configurations and prices for the program depending on the particular needs for the classroom or home. These prices range from \$100 or less for various starter components to over \$3,000 for a comprehensive system with extensions and supplements for special populations. For more information regarding ordering products or professional development, email customer.service@robert-leslie.com or call our customer service department at 773-935-8358.

Victor: What are some examples of it in action?



Under Construction Investigation in Head Start

Judi: The InvestiGator Club has been designated as an approved pre-K curriculum in states around the country – North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Pennsylvania, and more. The program is used in virtually every state and Mexico, in small rural preschools, Head Start classrooms, large urban school districts like Chicago, Indian reservations in Minnesota, private faith-based schools, childcare chains, daycare centers, special education classes, bilingual classrooms, and by individual parents. You can see examples of the program in action by going to The InvestiGator Club website.

Victor: Who is it particularly tailored for? Who is it not for?

Judi: We purposely created The InvestiGator Club so that it could be used with ALL young children – that was actually our mission. Throughout the Teacher Guides with the program, we provided differentiation tips for the teacher so that she can customize instruction for children with special needs, those learning English as a second language, younger children in the classroom, or those who need more challenge. In addition, we provide supplementary materials specifically targeted to adapting the curriculum for children with special needs, including autism; Spanish instructional materials; social-emotional development; Just for Threes; and Family Engagement.

Victor: What are your thoughts on education these days? What is your outlook on the future of education?

Judi: I think one key to quality education in the future is going to be a focus on individualization and shared responsibility between schools, parents, and students. As publishers, it is important that the products we create reflect evidence-based best practices that actually help students learn, whether digital or print. The opportunities through technology and media to find and analyze data, connect and communicate with experts and learners throughout the world, and share conclusions and opinions in a virtual learning environment will continue to evolve and challenge educators to guide students to be efficient researchers, high-level thinkers, and clear communicators.

Victor: Could you share a quirky or funny anecdote that our readers would find interesting?

Judi: I love that question. I'm going to tell you two stories if that's okay. The first happened in our first year of selling The InvestiGator Club. In fact, it was actually at the very beginning, so even though we knew the program would do well based on focus groups, pilot tests, field tests, and dozens of interviews and trials, those things are never quite the same as actually trying to sell a product. Our sales consultant did a full presentation of the program to a group of about 14 directors and teachers in a parish in Louisiana. They were nodding and saying, "uh-huh" every few minutes during the presentation, sort of like a gospel brunch. Near the end, one of the ladies stood up and yelled "Hallelujah!" They all started clapping, and suddenly there was a room full of ladies standing on chairs in this small meeting room chanting, "Hallelujah!"

The second story is about an email I received from a teacher in California. One of her students was a little girl with autism who never spoke to anyone and couldn't look anyone in the eye. Ana started using The InvestiGator Club puppets to communicate and would actually talk to the teacher, holding the puppet in front of her. Her mother was ecstatic at the change in her behavior at home, too. The teacher emailed me to ask if she could get an extra Chuck Wood puppet, as he was Ana's favorite, so that she could send hers home with the girl. I sent her another puppet and almost immediately got another email saying that now the girl was also communicating a lot with Great Auntie Lu and didn't want to give her back at the end of the day. She was hoping I could help. So, I sent a whole set of puppets to Ana's home. The mother and teacher were very grateful, and the entire situation reminded me of exactly why we created InvestiGator Club in the first place.



Dramatic Play Scene and Stick Puppets

Victor: What else can you tell educators and other leaders in and around education about the value of The InvestiGator Club?

Judi: The InvestiGator Club to me is a perfect model for what education should be, not just for young children, but also through the K-12 grades. The program is based on core principles of respect for the learner, the teacher, and the parents, and the value that each of them brings to the learning process. The premise of The InvestiGator Club that can be applied to all ages is that an effective learning system starts with a student's quest to know more about a topic, engages the student in the investigative process through questioning and experimentation, and immerses the student in critical thinking and rich language experiences that foster good communication skills. Whether I am wearing my Rainbow hat or my Robert-Leslie Publishing hat, I enjoy applying these underlying principles to every educational project we touch.



Magnetic Math Kit

Victor: Thank you, Judi!

Judi: Thank you, Victor!

Victor Rivero tells the story of 21st-century education transformation. He is the editor-in-chief of EdTech Digest, a magazine about education transformed through technology. He has written white papers, articles and features for schools, nonprofits and companies in the education marketplace. Write to: victor@edtechdigest.com