

Go on, be a curious cat! (Deccan Herald May 6, 2010)

Arvind Gupta shows children how to make toys that twirl, spin, fly and jump using common materials. Kavitha K looks on in amazement as science comes alive



Eyeing the table overflowing with odds and ends ranging from empty plastic bottles, ice-cream sticks, straws to old refills, the 7-9 year olds, squatting on the floor at Ranga Shankara on a summer morning, are bursting with curiosity. “Are you a magician?” one precocious kid demands, giving Arvind Gupta a keen look.

With his flowing white beard, long, artistic fingers, twinkling eyes and bare feet, Arvind Gupta certainly looks the part and to him goes the credit of popularising science among children through amazing, low-cost toys.

For a generation growing up on gadgets such as the PS3, the Nintendo Wii or the Beyblade, his toys are a revelation. They are made from old newspapers, bottle caps, matchsticks and other bobs and bits — and plenty of imagination.

“See science in every day life because science is not about hardware. It does not lie in expensive pipettes and burettes. Science is a way of looking at the world,” says the IIT Kanpur graduate, who has been touring India with his Science Toys workshops for over 30 years.

“What must you do when the teacher leaves the class?” he asks his wide-eyed bunch. “Every self-respecting child should have fun with pencils, paper, erasers and rubber bands, making catapults, rockets and planes when the teacher is away,” he says with a chuckle and the kids instantly warm up to him.

Later, in a chat with DH Education, he explains why he prefers to work with young minds, and not with figures of authority, refusing to “institutionalise” his work-shops.

“Children are the only curious people left in the world. They are our only hope because they question everything and everyone — parents, teachers, authority. That’s how science goes forward; that’s how society goes forward by questioning everything and rejecting so-called universal truths,” he says.

Back at the workshop, he has more ‘lessons’ for his audience. “The best thing you can do with a toy is to break it,” he declares amidst whoops of delight from the children. As the little fingers get busy with bits of old newspaper and sturdy thread under his watchful eyes, a flapping bird takes shape. And, before they know it the kids are learning the basics of aerodynamics to understand why and how their bird flaps its wings.

Cutting out newspapers into squares, then into small triangles and snipping off a piece at the centre gives them a rabbit with a tail. “Pull the tail and watch the ears flap,” he says as 30 pairs of small but remarkably sure hands fashion their own ‘magic’ rabbits.

With empty matchboxes and thread, he fashions a moving train on parallel tracks.

But the blockbuster toy of the day is the noisiest one, which makes delightfully wicked sounds.

Made of two straws — folded and cut — it produces everything from a low and menacing growl to a high-pitched squeal while he demonstrates to the children that vibration produces sound.

“It delights me to teach kids to make extraordinary things with simple things,” Arvind Gupta says. And in his journey of igniting young minds, he has also contributed immensely to the creation of fabulous, low-cost toys for visually challenged children. These toys have become teaching aids.

It isn't surprising that he loves to quote the following lines:

“And somewhere there are engineers
Helping others fly faster than sound.
But, where are the engineers
Helping those who must live on the ground?”

His current four-day workshop in the City may be overbooked, as always, but the good news is that you can find out all about his fascinating toys such as the flexagon, the nutty centrifuge, the balloon pump, the newspaper caps, or the no-glue cube from his website www.arvindguptatoys.com.