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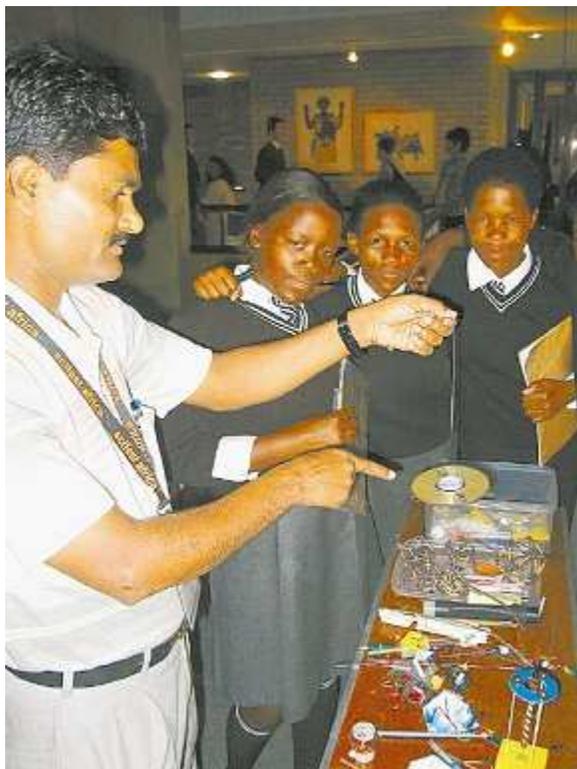


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SciFest kids dazzled by innovative toy ideas

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INTRIGUED: Khwaza High School pupils from Confinvaba in the Transkei (from left) Wezeka Tsomo, 16, Pholisa Mgcebesha, 16, and Amanda Tsombo, 14, were among

LOOKING for a really different toy? How about a levitating pencil holder, a musical bean, a "spiral snake", a woodpecker or a flexagon?

Or what about a gyro-disc, a nutty centrifuge or matchstick Meccano?

While you may expect these ingenious toys (and 1000-odd others) to cost plenty of rands, in fact the parts are free – or else just a few rupees (less than a rand) in India, where they are produced by the Children's Science Centre. Most importantly, children there – and all over the world – can make them for themselves.

Located in the west Indian city of Pune, the centre is run by a three-man team, and a representative from that team, Ashok Rupner, is one of the busiest and most popular speakers here at SciFest Africa in Grahamstown.

Rupner said this week his passion for cheap and simple toys stemmed from his own childhood growing up in a poor rural village near Pune. There were no toys – except the ones he and his friends could make, and the parts they used were usually bits of waste they had collected.

the throngs of children enthralled by the Indian Children's Science Centre "science toys from waste" exhibit presented by Ashok Rupner at SciFest this week.

After finishing school, he tackled a degree in science and went on to get his masters before turning to and completing an education degree.

But then, looking for a job years later in Pune, he remembered his childhood activity. He was also inspired by renowned scientist and writer Arvind Gupta, who was launching the centre, and he joined Gupta's team.

The centre was built by the Indian government 12 years ago and the team's salaries and the running costs are covered by Tata, the Indian motor vehicle giant. The focus of the team's work is interacting with schools and they have conducted 2000-odd workshops with pupils and teachers around India, Rupner explained.

"This is not a commercial venture. We don't believe in selling our toys. The aim is to teach the people – and especially the children – how they can make toys for themselves and at the same time learn about scientific principles. We teach this through direct interaction and through books, which we do sell for a nominal fee."

Between this outreach work, they continue to design more toys. Sometimes the idea is a totally new one, sometimes it's an object or a concept that has already been explored and it's a matter of finding cheap readily available materials to duplicate it, he said.

In Grahamstown, for five hours before and after his workshop each day of the festival (it started on Wednesday and runs until Tuesday) Ashok holds crowds of youngsters and adults spellbound showing his toys at his exhibition table in the 1820 Settlers Monument.

Materials include straws, bits of wire, rubber and slivers of compact disc, cardboard, paper, old balloons, film canisters and small magnets – one of the few items that has to be bought.

Some of the toys which seem to be attracting particular interest are also the simplest. The "spiral snake" consists of a curly length of wire and coloured pieces of straw which "slither" up and down it. The flexagon – which Ashok uses to explain the web of life – is made from a single scrap of paper. Slightly more complex, the DC motor is built from safety pins, rubber bands, copper wire and magnets.

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