

details

Giving Children A Sunny Outlook

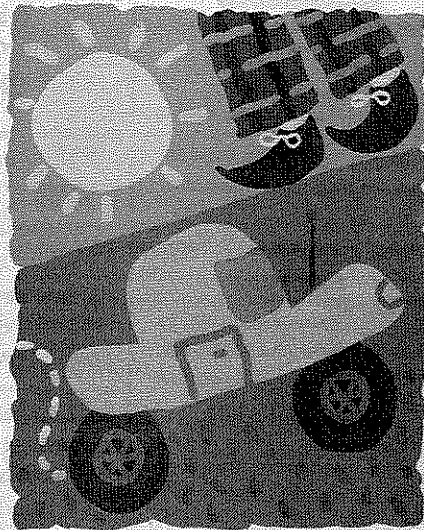
MOST 10-YEAR-OLDS visiting their grandparents like to play outside or watch TV. But when Stephanie Catlett visits her grandma and grandpa in rural California, she has a different way of amusing herself: watching the couple's windmill spin.

With her curiosity piqued about a device powered by something other than electricity or gasoline, Stephanie recently asked her mother for a \$25 solar-powered car kit. "It was pretty simple to put together," says the fifth-grader in Fremont, Calif. "But we couldn't find a hammer, so my dad used a hairbrush to nail in the wheels."

A small group of toy makers are tapping into a growing market: alternative-energy gizmos. These kits let kids assemble things ranging from sun-powered cookers to robots powered by solar cells.

DiscoverThis.com, an online educational-toy store, says sales of alternative-energy kits have outpaced traditional science kits by 30% for the past two years. In El Sobrante, Calif., Norman & Globus, a maker of educational science products, says its five-year-old, \$25 solar-powered car kit is one of its best sellers. And then there's the \$150 Power House kit from Thames & Kosmos, a distributor of science-education products in Portsmouth, R.I. Introduced in 2003, the kit lets kids build a foot-tall house, complete with solar panels, windmills and a greenhouse. It even comes with watercress and sunflower seeds so the children can grow their own plants.

These companies are tapping into the increasing popularity of adult-size solar, wind and fuel-cell energy products. From 2002 to 2004, this "clean energy" market grew to more than \$16 billion world-wide from \$9.5 billion, according to Clean Edge Inc., a research



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firm in San Francisco. Kids are also learning more about alternative energy at school, where some businesses have started sponsoring programs on fuel cells and the Department of Energy is promoting contests in which children build cars that use alternative power.

Ten-year-old Kurt Marking in Elkton, Md., doesn't know or care about alternative energy, but he likes to build stuff, so his grandfather gave him a Triple Action Solar Car kit from OWI Inc. for Christmas. The fact Kurt has yet to assemble the kit over a month after he ripped it from its wrapping doesn't faze his grandfather, Ronald Marking, a high-tech consultant. "Technology is our future," says Mr. Marking. "I'll probably buy him a fuel-cell car next."

Yet just like with the industry overall, the toy makers don't have all the kinks worked out of their products. Some parents complain the kits can be confusing to assemble and sometimes don't work quite right. When 13-year-old Branden Coons built an alternative-energy car for a school project and tested it in its solar-power mode, it ran out of ... sun. "When the car got under a tree or in the shade, it just stopped," says his mother, Heather Coons, an accountant in Orlando, Fla. "That would be hard to drive," says Ms. Coons.

—Ashley Chapman