

**Sarah Milne** test drives some Christmas gifts with son William and his friends.

# All I want for Christmas...



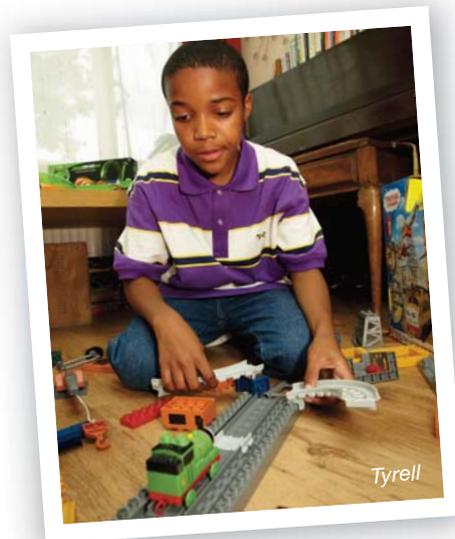
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**W**hen I asked my blog followers at [www.oliverandwill.s.co.uk](http://www.oliverandwill.s.co.uk) what they wanted for

Christmas this year, one reply really hit home. A mother of a child with autism said all she wished for was that her son would open and enjoy just one present this year. I immediately thought of all the cupboards we have, full of unopened boxes of toys, that my own son, William, seven, who has high-functioning autism, has been given over the years. So began a mission to find toys that would capture the attention and imagination of children with autism this Christmas.

We invited some of William's friends over to help us put the toys to the test – Giovanni, ten, who has Asperger syndrome; Tyrell, 11, who has autism; and James, six, who also has autism.

All four boys were immediately drawn to DaGeDar, a range of collectable balls, each containing a weighted ball-bearing and each with its own 'biography'. There's also an interactive website to go with the collection. You can buy stunt and race tracks to throw the balls down, watching them loop the loop and jump obstacles. When these tracks work, it's very exciting but it takes a little skill to do it without the balls falling off and this frustrated all the boys. They quickly lost interest so I was



Tyrell

surprised that DaGeDar were the toys they all wanted to take home. I think it was the collecting aspect that captured their imagination!

Then we got out a remote-control helicopter by Bladez Toyz. Having it fly around the room instantly amused everyone. Giovanni has an obsession with transport and quickly became hooked on the helicopter. He

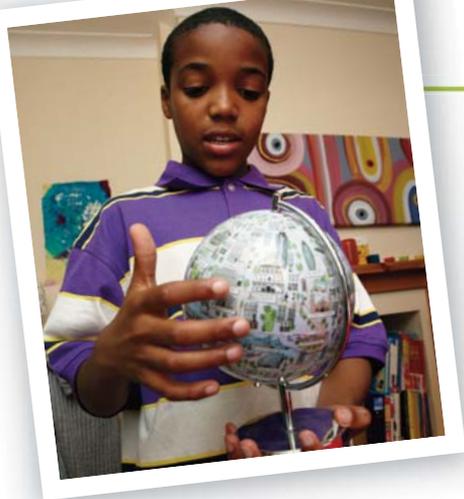
was the only one able to control the toy for himself and it was, by far, his favourite activity in the afternoon.

William and James enjoyed playing with simpler remote-control toys, Disney's Mater from the film *Cars*, and a fantastic new Thomas & Friends™ toy, Follow Me Thomas, where the child points and moves light from a hand-held lantern and Thomas follows along, making engine sounds and saying phrases. This was a great multi-sensory toy for the younger children and something that they could control for themselves and enjoy straight from the box. William also enjoyed the Thomas & Friends™ Leader of the Track laptop. Most of the activities on there are a bit young for him but he enjoyed being able to choose games and getting all the answers right. William, James and Tyrell also enjoyed playing with the Mega Bloks' Day of the Dieselworks playset that ties in with the new Thomas DVD adventure *The Day of*



Giovanni





*the Diesels*. This was a great activity to share with adults.

After all that excitement, we decided to calm down a bit with some quiet toys. Everyone loved the Globee, one of a range of globes, depicting a pictorial map of a city. We looked at the London one and Giovanni decided he would like one to plan bus routes on. Tyrell felt it would be a good way to plan a day out and William liked seeing places he'd visited recently. All of the children rated the Globee among their favourite toys. It was also a big hit with the adults.

Another big hit was Rory's Story Cubes, a set of nine cubes with a picture on each face. The idea is to throw the cubes and make up a story containing every picture. James' mum, Tamsyn, felt that this would help children with autism to develop creativity and imagination, something they find hard to do if given just a blank piece of paper. Tyrell enjoyed making up a story about a crocodile. Everyone agreed the cubes would make great stocking fillers.

It was clear that the most popular toys were ones that instantly had lots of action and multi-sensory stimulation.

The Wilko Play Alien Target Game was fantastic. All the boys successfully hit the target, making the alien light up and groan. They were all keen to do this over and over again and everyone agreed this toy would be in their letters to Santa this year. The Wilko Play Drum Star was a favourite



with James, William and Tyrell. James and William loved the lights and noise and Tyrell liked the way you can attach an MP3 player and drum along to your favourite tracks. He said he would pretend he was in the band while he played.

William is a big sensory-seeker and feels the need to move and fidget all the time. His favourite toy of all was the Happy Hopperz Reindeer. These are blow-up toys (that come with a pump) that children can sit on and bounce up and down on. There are lots of animals in the range and they would be fantastic toys for any pre-school child.

At the end of a hectic afternoon, we all relaxed with a selection of sensory toys from Early Learning Centre (fantastic stocking fillers) and the boys chose their three favourite toys.

Giovanni chose the helicopter, DaGeDar, and the Globee; William chose the Happy Hopperz, Leader of the Track Thomas Laptop and the Alien Target Game; James chose Follow Me Thomas, the helicopter and Alien Target Game; and Tyrell chose the drum, Globee and Story Cubes.



## Sarah's top ten recommendations

- 1 **Wilko Play Alien Target Game.** £10. [www.wilkinsonplus.com](http://www.wilkinsonplus.com)
- 2 **Globee.** From £14.95. [www.globee.co.uk](http://www.globee.co.uk)
- 3 **Thomas & Friends™ Follow Me Thomas.** £44.99. [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)
- 4 **Rory's Story Cubes.** £9.99. [www.lakeland.co.uk](http://www.lakeland.co.uk)
- 5 **DaGeDar.** Balls from £6.99; stunt track from £9.99. See [www.dagedar.com](http://www.dagedar.com) for stockists.
- 6 **Bladez Toyz Remote Control Helicopters.** From £25. [www.bladeztoyz.co.uk](http://www.bladeztoyz.co.uk)
- 7 **Wilko Play Drum Star.** £13. [www.wilkinsonplus.com](http://www.wilkinsonplus.com)
- 8 **Thomas & Friends™ Leader of the Track laptop.** £39.99. [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)
- 9 **Happy Hopperz.** £18.99. [www.happyhopperz.co.uk](http://www.happyhopperz.co.uk)
- 10 **Thomas & Friends™ Day at the Dieselworks Mega Bloks.** £34.99. Smaller sets and individual engines also available from £9.99. [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)

*The toys featured here are widely available in shops or online at the websites given. Please note the recommendations are those of the author and not necessarily of the NAS.*



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