

Top toys

Talking parrots and dragonflies are among the expected big sellers. But which are the best?



Two young testers try out some of the toys

The average British child receives 22.5 toys at Christmas, compared with five for German youngsters. It's a tough job, but we set our testing panel of children and adults to try out some of those presents hotly tipped to be under the tree. Most of them are widely stocked, but shop around for best prices.

If these gifts don't appeal, you could consider a trip down memory lane. Like Which?, Scalextric celebrated its 50th anniversary this year, while Monopoly has launched a Here and Now edition replac-

ing London streets with UK cities voted for by the public. St Albans takes Mayfair's place as the most expensive buy on the board. Alternatively, if money is no object, what about buying a limited-edition, half-sized replica 1930s' racing car? The pedal-powered Audi Auto Union Type C Grand Prix car would set you back a cool £6,800.

■ None of the toys in this report has been affected by the recent scares over the amount of lead in paint on some toys. If you are concerned about the issue, you can visit www.mattel.com or www.fisher-price.com for more information.

Contacts

Flytech Dragonfly

0161 633 9898

www.character-online.co.uk

Harry Potter

01628 500303

www.mattel.com

High School Musical

0870 850 8408; www.spinmastertoys.co.uk

Junior Tradesman

01278 434440

www.hippychick.com

Kid-tough camera

01628 500303

www.fisher-price.com/uk

Optimus Prime

00800 2242 7276

www.hasbro.co.uk

Power Tour Guitar

00800 2242 7276

www.hasbro.co.uk

Smart Cycle

01628 500303; www.fisher-price.com/uk

Squawkers McCaw

00800 2242 7276

www.hasbro.co.uk

Spider-man 3

Ultimate Web Blaster

00800 2242 7276

www.hasbro.co.uk

Thomas Magic

Storytime Theatre

023 8066 2600

www.tomy.co.uk

UB Funkeys

01628 500303

www.radicauk.com

Our favourites

Some of the hotly-tipped gifts that were most fun

■ FLYTECH DRAGONFLY (£40)

needed several attempts to get airborne at first. The radio-controlled polystyrene model hovered briefly, then dive-bombed. Once in the sky, it's easier to control than you think, and it's addictive. Our testers still need practice, though; we had to knock on a neighbour's door to retrieve our misdirected toy.

WE FOUND The instructions say the optional tail ribbon is a good training aid. We agree and had more success with it attached.

AGE GROUP Eight to adult

BATTERIES Six AA (not included)



■ HARRY POTTER SCENE IT? 2ND EDITION (£30)

combines a traditional board game, using dice and question cards, with DVD clips. It's fun and easy to follow, but it's difficult unless you are a true Harry Potter fan. If you have only a fleeting grasp, your best bet is a DVD question – these have a mix of observation questions, anagrams and other visual clues. Even these rely on a good knowledge of Potter trivia.

WE LIKE There are enough questions to make it unlikely you'll see the same ones twice.

AGE GROUP Eight to adult

BATTERIES n/a

■ SQUAWKERS McCAW (£70),

a battery-operated parrot, was a huge hit with our testers. It has a movable beak and is programmed with phrases and sounds it will use as replies if you prompt it. You can also teach it new phrases, which is great fun. It responds to stroking and dances if you play music.

WORTH KNOWING There's a remote control, programmed with parrot noises.

AGE GROUP Five plus

BATTERIES Four

AA for the

parrot

(included)

and two

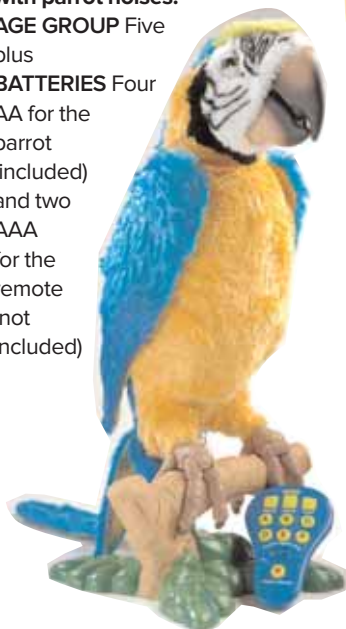
AAA

for the

remote

(not

included)



■ SMART CYCLE (£100) is the

priciest present on test. It's a mini exercise bike that plugs in to your TV, combining exercise with learning. The screen displays puzzles and games and your child peddles towards them and uses buttons and controls on the bike to answer letter and number puzzles.

WE LIKE You can buy extra software for the Smart Cycle, such as SpongeBob Squarepants and Dora the Explorer games.

AGE GROUP Five plus

BATTERIES Four 'D'/LR20

alkaline batteries (included)



MAYBES

These toys are worth considering but have some drawbacks

■ UB FUNKEYS (£20 FOR STARTER KIT AND TWO FUNKEYS)

links to an online world of games by using a docking station that connects to your PC. There are different games to try depending on which

Funkey you put into the docking

station. New keys cost £5 each. It's a good way to help youngsters gain confidence in using computers and our six-year-old tester liked the games. We had problems installing the software and needed to go to the Funkeys' website to get help on fixing it. This was easy to do, though.

WORTH KNOWING If you think buying extra Funkeys is

expensive, try www.clubpenguin.com games, which are free with options for subscription. **AGE GROUP** 6 to 14 **BATTERIES** n/a

■ **POWER TOUR GUITAR (£70)** is aimed at children who hanker to play guitar but give up as they struggle to master the technique. It's styled as a pared-down electric guitar and is programmed with rock classics you can strum along to, following

lights on the fretboard. Under-tens loved making as much noise as they could, but were less inclined to learn to follow the notes. It's more suitable for children over ten.

WE LIKE There's a headphone socket so mini-Jimi Hendrixes can practise quietly.

AGE GROUP Ten plus **BATTERIES** Four AA batteries (not included)



AVOID THE HYPE

■ KID-TOUGH DIGITAL CAMERA (£60)

is rugged and easy to use. Our young snappers loved taking pictures but filled its memory in five minutes (you can delete photos or buy a memory card). When we looked at the photos on a PC, the colour and quality were poor.

■ THOMAS MAGIC STORYTIME THEATRE (£35)

underwhelmed Cameron (three), a Thomas fan. There is a projector that can read the two story books while showing images or it can be used with parents reading. Many parents use bedtime stories to bond with their children, so the projector-only option was disliked.



■ SPIDER-MAN 3 ULTIMATE WEB BLASTER (£40)

was a huge hit with our young testers. It's a weapon worn on the arm that lets you shoot soft red plastic darts or squirt string at your victims. Our would-be Spider-men, Sam (six), Alex (eight) and Sam (ten), seemed to love it and ran riot, but parents wondered about whether the toys would have long-term appeal, given the chance of losing the darts and other weapons.

WORTH KNOWING You can buy replacement web fluid from www.hasbrotoyshop.co.uk **AGE GROUP** Five plus **BATTERIES** n/a



■ JUNIOR TRADESMAN

FIRST HOUSE (£20) harks back to traditional values in its old-fashioned name and the lack of batteries or bright plastics. Unusual and involving, it contains bricks and the building materials you need to construct a miniature house on the plan provided. It's a simple idea and you can rebuild to improve your technique. You need patience to build and dismantle it, but this toy is a calming antidote to some of the louder alternatives that are around.

WORTH KNOWING Adult supervision may be needed, as few instructions are provided. **AGE GROUP** Six plus **BATTERIES** n/a

■ OPTIMUS PRIME VOICE CHANGER HELMET (£30)

is a helmet-mask with a built-in voice distorter and has sound effects to make you sound like the film character Optimus Prime. The kids in our trial loved it, but appeal might wane in the long term when Transformers slip out of fashion. You can also buy a similar Doctor Who version.

WORTH KNOWING The helmet is big enough to fit adult heads, so you can have a go, too.

AGE GROUP Five plus **BATTERIES** Three AA (included)



■ DVD DANCE STUDIO (£30)

draws on the popular Disney Channel *High School Musical* series. It includes a DVD, dance mat, and six character pieces. Players choose a character, answer questions and sing or dance along to the songs to move around the board. Jessie (seven) and Bethany (ten) were thrilled to test the game but found some dance moves complicated. It might suit children a bit older than the minimum recommended age.

WORTH KNOWING Accessories include an inflatable mini basketball and a headset. **AGE GROUP** Five plus **BATTERIES** n/a