I recently browsed the toy department at Walmart and was disturbed. You see, I had not looked at toys in 20 years. What I observed was a disturbing development in the nature of toys. What I experienced was “toys’ noise”— almost every toy talks, sings, plays, and blinks. And, most are fully structured toys: how and what will be done with them as well as what will fill the child’s head is predetermined by the toy maker. In short supply are the unstructured toys: those requiring imagination and physical involvement to create story context, determine roles, and animate play. Why does the “toys’ noise” bother me? Because it sets up children’s memes.

A meme, a term coined by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* in 1976, is the mind/cultural counterpart to the biological gene. We inherit genes. We absorb our memes from our experience context. Memes are bits of cultural fibre—the explanations and expectations of how things are, what things mean, and how they relate. Memes form the foundation of understanding and decisions because everything new is filtered through them. For example, in our culture we develop a meme of ownership—an individual can “own” an object or a piece of land. Other cultures, like the occupants of North America in 1492, did not possess this meme. Memes form quickly and easily in infants but are very hard to change in a culture as a whole. Witness the problem of changing the memes supporting a patriarchal culture. Holders of memes rarely are aware of their existence and do not question them.

**Toys’ noise and memes.** We fundamentally “know” that music consists of sound and sound requires some series of physical efforts—striking, pushing, pulling, blowing, breathing etc. We realize that sound can come from recordings but mostly we believe these are electronic copies of someone’s physical movements initiating sound. Increasingly, our consumer society is shifting to music emanating from radios, CD or MP3 players, computers, etc. But, mostly these are “transmitting devices” for sound we know is created by sustained physical effort that required learning and practice. Now with noisy toys our meme makers are seeing sound emerge from anywhere—not linked to instruments and voices. Music happens when you push a button, shake a toy, or even cry long enough. There is no association with repetitive or sustained motion. No “music-making.” Perhaps even more important is the nature of the sound to which infants and young children are subjected: often shallow, unfocused, and discordant. The child’s aural expectation template is being set up by “Muttzart,” the “Jazzman Sax,” or “Leap’s Learning Band.” And, what these “programmed” toys are replacing is just as important. What do they keep our children from doing?
So, when today’s children enter school, we cannot assume their minds have the same meme sets we have or children had 20 years ago. Will they be more musically “ready” and developed because every toy sang and played? Or, will they need remedial attention?