Today’s piece was prepared by Maggie Bevilacqua, MD, and comes from a May 16, 2012 story from ABC News titled “Head Lag – Head and Neck Weakness – May Be Sign of Autism in 6-Month-Olds” <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/head-lag-babies-sign-autism/story?id=16353502>

This article summarizes two recent studies conducted at the Kennedy Krieger Institute that suggest that head lag on the pull-to-sit test at six months may help in early detection of autism spectrum disorders. Dr. Rebecca Landa and her research team studied two groups of infants who were considered to be at high genetic risk of autism. The first group included 40 babies who were tested at 6, 14, and 24 months old. The researchers concluded that 90% of babies who were diagnosed with ASD and 54% of children who had other developmental delays showed persistent head lag as infants. The second study compared head lag in babies at high versus low genetic risk, finding that 75% of high-risk infants exhibited head lag, compared to 33% of low-risk infants. Dr. Landa suggests that if an infant sibling of a child with autism has head lag, “parents should mention this to a specialist.”

Landa’s findings are due to be presented in an upcoming conference, but as of yet have not actually been published or gone through a peer-review process, which the ABC article does not disclose. The article does not define “high genetic risk of autism,” does not mention that non-genetic/environmental variables may also contribute to increased risk for atypical neurodevelopment (e.g., autism) within a family, including: pre-natal risk factors, parenting, nutrition, “toxic”, etc., and does not discuss the characteristics of the two groups of infants, or give any raw numbers about how many children actually had autism or other delays. It is appropriate that detailed methodology is not presented in a popular media article, but without a published primary source, it is impossible to determine the validity of the claims. The research outlined here may ultimately prove helpful in early diagnosis of autism, but it is concerning that this online article, which was accompanied by YouTube videos of head lag, clips from prime time news, and many opinionated blog posts, may play on the massive public concern about autism before being adequately reviewed.

**RESOURCES ON AUTISM & DIAGNOSIS:**[Detect Autism Early: Interactive Tools for Parents](http://www.cdc.gov/Features/DetectAutismTools/) CDC parent tools to watch for and record milestones[First Signs](http://www.firstsigns.org/) For parents and professionals to help identify early signs of autism[National Institute of Mental Health - Autism](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/autism-spectrum-disorders-pervasive-developmental-disorders/index.shtml" \t "_blank) NIH website with general autism information and guidelines

And that’s today’s Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics: IN THE NEWS!