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## The Age of Autism: About those 'old dads'

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The study released this week that found older fathers more likely to have autistic children has created a media stir. But there may be less to the story than meets the eye.

"Autism Risk Rises With Age Of Father -- Large Study Finds Strong Correlation" was the headline on the top left of the Washington Post's front page.

It's nice to see autism on the front page and, yes, the study drew from a large pool, "an enormous sample of 17-year-olds" in Israel over a period of six years in the 1980s, as the Post put it. The researchers were able to determine the age of both parents for 132,271 draft candidates.

And yes, older men were found to have a greater risk of fathering an autistic child than men under 30.

Yes, but: The study was done in another country, involving kids born 20 years ago when the autism rate was much lower. Plus, there's something called the "confidence interval" -- basically, the margin of error -- in scientific studies, and it comes into play here. In a letter to Britain's Daily Mail, researcher Clifford Miller wrote:

"There were only 13 autistic children born to fathers 40 and over considered in the study -- there were 128,000 children with fathers under 40 but only 4,000 with fathers over 40."

Given that not-so-enormous number in the key demographic, the margin of error in calculating the increased risk is ... well, enormous.

"The lowest risk figure of 2.65 times for fathers 40 and over fathering an autistic child is exactly the same as the highest risk figure for fathers between 30 and 39."

Those overlapping figures "could be used to argue that there is no significant difference between dads in their 30s and 40s," said Mark Blaxill, a vice president of the advocacy group SafeMinds, which believes that an environmental factor -- possibly the mercury in vaccinations -- is behind the huge rise in U.S. cases over the past 20 years.

Still, Blaxill calls the result "interesting" -- "All data is good, in my view, and this is data." He notes that previous studies of parental age and autism risk have had mixed findings. "If it's a factor, it's certainly not an overwhelmingly large one."

The most important issue is what the study appears to suggest: "Autism Study Hints at Genetics," as the

