



## WEARING YOUR BABY

*PARENTING MAGAZINE*

Do you have time to cuddle your baby as much as you would like? Do you often feel that you have to choose between holding your infant and getting the housework done? Do you hesitate to take your newborn to a restaurant because you're afraid that she might cry too much?

Because their lives and their hands are so full parents often resort to wheeling and parking their babies—in strollers, playpens, walkers, and cribs. Although these devices seem to provide the most hassle-free way to tend to infants, there may, in fact, be a more effective and gratifying method. From our experience, babies who are held most of the time are more content—and easier to care for.

For busy parents, though, often it's not possible to hold a baby for long stretches of time. And most baby carriers are either too cumbersome, too confining, or too quickly outgrown. But with the variety of slings that have recently become available, it's possible to “wear” babies from the time they are newborns until well into toddlerhood. Babies can now easily sleep, eat, or be comforted while their parents are at the market, walking on the beach with their other children, or simply working around the house.

This novel parenting style is actually as old as the most traditional cultures of Asia and Africa. We learned this at an international child development conference in 1985, where we met two Zambian women carrying their babies in slings that were a part of their native dress. Impressed by how calm these children were and how attentive to them their mothers seemed, we asked these women why they wore their babies. They volunteered two compelling—and simple—reasons: it's good for the baby, and it makes life easier for the mother.

Intrigued by what we had seen and heard, we began studying the benefits of baby slings, and we adopted this parenting tool with the three babies who have entered our own home laboratory” since then. In addition to having logged quite a few miles carrying our own children in slings, we have recommended this technique to the parents of the babies we care for in our pediatric practice. By interviewing more than 300 of these families over the past several years, we've learned a great deal about the intricacies of babywearing.

Although there are several kinds of baby carriers to choose from (with new variations appearing all the time), we prefer simply constructed, one-shoulder slings for a number of reasons. First of all, they are easy to use and reasonably priced. And compared to other carriers, they are more attractive and more like a piece of apparel, so both mothers and fathers are enthusiastic about using them. Slings also allow for discreet breastfeeding, and they accommodate a baby's changing size and development. For instance, newborns can be cradled against a parent's chest (a handy position for on-the-spot nursing); from three to six months, babies often enjoy a forward-facing position; and from six months to two years, children can be carried sideways on the hip.

As helpful as slings can be, we don't want to give the impression that all babies must be worn constantly. There is no correct amount of time—only what works for a particular family. In deciding, parents need to consider their infant's temperament, the family's routines, and



whether parent and child enjoy this physically close relationship. But as those two Zambian mothers so wisely pointed out, how can you go wrong with something that makes life easier for babies and parents alike?

## **BABY BENEFITS**

Infants seem to enjoy this method of travel, too. For one thing, they cry less when they are in a sling, perhaps because being carried reminds them of the womb. We often suggest that parents of particularly fussy newborns think of a baby's gestation as lasting 18 months: 9 months inside the womb followed by 9 months of life outside. And it helps to remember that motion, not stillness, is the normal state for a newborn. A mother's walk and heartbeat are familiar reminders of the calming rhythms the fetus experienced. In this womblike pouch, newborns — who are usually not yet set in their eating, sleeping, and breathing cycles—slip more easily into regular routines.

This extra cuddling is particularly important for babies who are colicky. Ethan, a patient of ours, was born after a stressful labor and delivery. Ethan's cries were ear-shattering, and the nursery staff would quickly shuttle him into his mother's room to avoid listening to his wails. Ethan's mother, Susan, had to admit that his crying was getting in the way of their bonding. As an experiment, we advised Susan and her husband to wear Ethan in a sling for at least four hours every day, and more if possible. We also instructed them to tape record his cries over a period of two weeks. Within that time, Ethan's wails mellowed considerably, and Susan was happy, in her words, to 'finally enjoy being with him. He cries much more nicely now.'

Our practical experience with baby slings has been backed up by researchers at McGill University in Montreal. In 1985, Dr. Urs Hunziker and Dr. Ronald Barr examined the effects of carrying 4 to 12-week-old infants an extra two hours a day. These babies cried as much as 43 percent less than the other infants in the study.

If babies who are worn cry less, what do they do with the energy that they aren't expending on fussing? Perhaps they are learning more about the world. We've noticed that babies in slings often seem to be quietly alert, the state in which they are most receptive to new experiences. During these periods, a baby's eyes are wide open and attentive, her body is still, and she seems involved with what she is watching. Perched in a sling, she's in the right place to take it all in. She sees what her mother or father sees, hears what they hear, and goes where they go. She becomes aware of her parents' facial expressions, voices, and scents. We like to think that life in a sling socializes babies.

Premature babies who are deprived of the final weeks or even months of development in the womb are particularly good candidates for slings. These babies must finish growing in an incubator, which has the disadvantage of being a static environment. Studies show that premies benefit from something called "kangaroo care," in which mothers hold their baby in much the same way that kangaroos carry their young. Mothers of premies nestle their diaper-clad baby skin-to-skin between their breasts. The combination of being next to the mother's



body and close to her breasts stimulates the baby to feed as often as his growing body requires.

These “kangaroo” babies go home from the hospital sooner and experience fewer breathing problems, according to Gene Cranston Anderson, a perinatal nursing professor at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. She also reports that mothers who participate in this kind of care are more confident about their mothering skills and feel that they are a valuable part of the newborn intensive care team, all of which contributes to the baby’s wellbeing.

### **A PARENTAL CAUSE**

Babies aren’t the only ones to benefit from slings; these carriers help moms and dads, too. There is nothing in the parent-baby contract that says a mother or father has to stay home and become a total recluse. Although most new parents don’t want to leave their babies right away, they are likely to go stir-crazy after a few months of being home-bound. Using a sling, parents can go to restaurants, parties, even movies, with a calm, relatively quiet baby who is more likely to be accepted—especially in a society that has traditionally not welcomed young children everywhere.

Many mothers have also found that slings make breastfeeding easier. This is particularly true for babies who in the early months seem to want to nurse constantly, what we call marathon nursers.

Equally important, carriers help mothers and fathers who are away from home during the day to reconnect with their infant during the evening hours. Some parents of our patients instruct their babysitters to wear the baby in a sling several hours a day. When these parents return from work; they, too, carry the baby around the house, which enables them to be close to their infant while serving dinner or tending to other household matters.

### **THE FAMILY SLING**

When adults wear babies, other kids learn that it’s a good thing for big people to carry little people. This point was brought home to us one day when our daughter Hayden, then six, was asked by her teacher to draw a mother and baby. She drew the two as essentially one person. She recognized that, at least in the early months, mothers and babies are inseparable.

Babywearing can also help families raise siblings with less rivalry. One mother reports that breastfeeding her new baby in a sling ‘gives me an extra pair of hands so I can play with and enjoy our toddler, too.’ Occasionally there are role reversals in this scene. Toddlers, seeing the closeness and attention that the new baby gets, may demand equal time in the sling.

There will be times when parents wonder if the baby-carrying stage ever ends. It will. As a baby grows increasingly independent, more squirmy, and enjoys more freestyle floor play, the time spent in a sling decreases. And no need to fear that babywearing will create an overly dependent or spoiled child. On the contrary in our experience and that of other parents, carried babies actually grow up to be less clingy kids.

When children are well adjusted, it’s a good bet that the parents will be happier too. Just remember, the time in Mom and Dad’s arms lasts a relatively short while, but the message of



love and availability lasts a lifetime.

### **SAFE BABYWEARING**

Mothers and fathers who have decided to use a baby sling should keep in mind some important safety issues:

- While getting used to wearing a sling, support your baby with both hands. Actually, most parents do this instinctively—like embracing your protruding abdomen when you were pregnant.
- Don't wear a baby while cooking, bicycling, or riding in a vehicle.
- A baby carrier is not a substitute for an approved car seat.
- To prevent accidents with your baby in a sling, try this safety rehearsal: Suddenly twist your upper body to grab something, and at the same time embrace your baby with the other arm. Practice this motion frequently; then, if an emergency occurs, you will naturally clasp your baby with one hand while reaching with the other.
- If you need to stoop over while wearing your baby, bend at the knees, not at the waist. Hold the baby in the sling with one hand while picking up something with the other.
- Toddlers In slings can grab dangerous or breakable objects. Keep an arm's distance away from potential hazards.
- When going through doorways or around corners, be careful that the baby's head or body does not stick out past your arm and strike the wall or doorjamb.
- Don't drink hot beverages when wearing a baby, although it's OK to wear her while you are eating.