



Jessica Northrup

Babywearing: A Natural Fashion Statement

by Andrea McMann

Babywearing is a growing trend these days, but it is as old as humankind. Although the actual term was coined by the author, pediatrician and attachment parenting proponent Dr. William Sears, baby carriers likely evolved very early in human history. Perhaps...the need to support an altricial (completely helpless) newborn may even have contributed to the evolution of bipedalism (walking on two legs),” says Katherine Dettwyler, PhD., a professor of anthropology at the University of Delaware. “And some people have suggested that the first ‘tool’ made by early humans was some sort of sling or net carrying device.” She goes on to explain that the earliest baby carriers were probably made of animal skin or plant fiber nets – “both things that do not preserve in the archeological record.”

If babywearing has been around so long, why isn't it more common now?

Dr. Dettwyler theorizes that, long ago, women of higher classes ceased wearing their babies as a status symbol. “Only the wealthy could afford prams (or) carriages and where would they be going except to take the baby out for sunshine and fresh air – and the wealthy would likely have the servants do it.”

Thankfully, babywearing is beginning to make a comeback and Susie Spence, president and co-founder of Babywearing International, believes that the Internet has played a vital role in its re-emergence. “Before high-speed Internet access was prevalent, access to baby carriers was, for most people, limited to what was available in their local big box stores,” Spence says. “E-commerce has radically changed the market for baby carriers and the overall effect has been very positive.”

However, Spence says that she thinks

it is liberating to think of babywearing as a parenting skill rather than as a function of a purchased baby carrier. “People all over the world carry their babies in pieces of fabric fashioned into slings simply by tying a knot.”

Why Babywearing?

In 1986, researchers Hunziker and Barr found that babies who are worn cry 43 percent less than babies who are not worn. In a 1991 study conducted at Columbia University, mothers with infants were given either plastic carriers or soft carriers. After a year, 83 percent of the babies who were carried in the soft carriers were determined to be securely attached to their mothers (in the psychological sense), whereas only 38 percent of the plastic carrier babies were securely attached. ▶

Babywearing Safety

While babywearing can be tremendously liberating, certain safety guidelines should be observed.

- “This may sound obvious, but babies need to breathe,” says David Kaufman, M.D., a pediatrician with Children’s Physicians of Omaha, Nebraska. “Make sure your infant is able to breathe through their nose when babywearing.”
- Never cook or handle hot liquids or sharp objects while wearing your baby.
- Adjust your carrier correctly, making sure your posture isn’t compromised.
- Do not bend at the waist. Instead, squat using your legs. This will save your back and keep your baby from falling out of the carrier.

David Kaufman, M.D., a pediatrician in Omaha, Nebraska, says that babywearing makes the transition to life outside the womb easier for newborns. “The majority of infants have just spent the past nine months in an environment that is in constant motion with a constant level of varying noises – from the beat of mom’s heart to the churning of her stomach, it is a noisy place to be! It is, therefore, very logical that infants will be calmer when in immediate contact with their care provider and in relatively con-

stant motion.”

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The skin contact provided by babywearing is also crucial to a baby’s health and development. “Researchers have found that infants who are touched and carried more produce more immunoglobulin, which protects against respiratory infections. Touch improves intellectual and motor development immediately from birth,” says Barbara Nicholson, co-founder of Attachment Parenting International. “It also helps regulate a baby’s temperature, heart rate and sleep/wake patterns, especially when baby is held skin-to-skin. These babies not only gain weight faster, but they nurse better, are calmer and are able to be more quickly soothed when they cry.”

For Toddlers Too

Carriers don’t lose their usefulness when babies learn to walk. Toddlers are heavy and can sometimes be clingy. Babywearing saves parents from aching backs and sore arms. Plus, as Nicholson discovered, carriers can keep curious toddlers out of trouble. “I...loved having a carrier with me if we were in a store that had many temptations like delicate breakable things.”

Baby carriers can also help siblings bond. Terri Korthase often wore her second child when she played with her son, who was two at the time. “When she was in the carrier, she was right between us when we were playing,” says the Riverdale, Michigan mom.

Lysa Parker, also a co-founder of Attachment Parenting International, says that though toddlers are more independent than younger babies, babywearing is still a welcome source of comfort. “It is healthy and a good sign to see toddlers play independently, then frequently go to their mother or father to touch them, show them a toy or seek comfort, then happily run off to play again. If they have been carried since birth, they will immediately associate carrying with feelings of warmth, safety and love.”

Free Yourself

One of the best things about babywearing is how much the parent can do with his or her hands free. “In to-

day’s busy world, babywearing helps parents to take care of their baby while managing the tasks of life: making a phone call, doing a load of laundry, getting some exercise,” says Ann Seacrest, a lactation consultant in Lincoln, Nebraska.

It’s amazing what a parent can accomplish while the baby snuggles comfortably in a carrier! California mom Nicole Bovey used her carrier when traveling by plane. “I found it wonderful to put the baby in the sling and to have my hands free for handing over tickets, paying and dragging carry-ons,” she says.

Alan Davis, a database programmer from Crete, Nebraska, is a babywearing father of six. He says, “I feel a father has to be as much a participant in child raising as the mother. Heck, even more so, because in the ‘traditional’ family model, Daddy is gone ten hours a day. He needs to make up some of that lost time, and lugging the baby along in a chestpack or backpack is definitely a step in the right direction.”

Babywearing fathers enjoy a close bond with their children and often have little sympathy for men who are afraid that they’ll look foolish wearing their babies. As Damon Smith, a produce operator in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, succinctly states, “Suck it up, princess. It’s your child too.”

The most important thing to remember when choosing a baby carrier is that everyone is different. Each person has unique likes and dislikes. “Don’t give up until you find something that works for you!” says Andrea Gilliland, owner of No Mother Left Behind. “All babies love to be worn, but it can take some time to find a carrier that is right for you.”

Like breastfeeding, baby carrying really is best for babies. Babywearing is a vital tradition that has been passed down from our earliest ancestors, an ancient art that still holds tremendous value. So why not wear your baby today?

Andrea McMann is a freelance writer from Nebraska. She discovered the joys of babywearing when her second child was born and has never looked back. In addition to babywearing, she is an advocate of co-sleeping, extended breastfeeding and gentle discipline. Read her blog about motherhood at www.writingfromkiddom.wordpress.com.



Choosing a Baby Carrier

Asian Baby Carriers

"The (ABC) is my favorite carrier of all, especially for toddlers. I love the support for my back and find it easiest to wear my child and nurse at the same time. It's also the most versatile, in my opinion, with such ease for a front or back carry and little need for constant adjustments," says Stephanie Precourt of Valparaiso, Indiana of her Asian Baby Carrier. Asian Baby Carriers (ABCs) are rectangles of fabric with a strap at each corner. They can be worn in front, back and sometimes on the hip.

Benefits

- Can be used through toddlerhood
- Sleek, portable
- Comfortable
- Fairly versatile
- Facilitates breastfeeding

Disadvantages

- Takes a bit of practice to use
- ABCs with thin straps are uncomfortable for carrying babies over 20 pounds
- Can't be used in cradle positions

Exciting Ergos

Tobi-Dawne Smith's husband uses his ergo almost exclusively. "He loves how comfortable, safe and stylish the ergo baby carrier is," says the Saskatoon, Saskatchewan mom. Ergos are similar to ABCs, but are more structured, with snaps and buckles. They can be used as a front pack or backpack, or sometimes as a hip carrier.

Benefits

- Very secure
- Comfortable enough for day-long outings
- Fairly versatile

Disadvantages

- Most can't be used with babies under five months
- Often intimidating to new babywearers
- Some can only be used as front packs
- Can't be used in cradle positions

Precious Pouches

Smith uses a pouch carrier with her daughter, Lily-Ann. "It's ideal for a novice baby wearer: easy to put on and no way to really mess up." Pouches are closely related to slings. Fitted pouches are tube-shaped and sized to fit a particular wearer. Other pouches can be adjusted with snaps, zippers, Velcro or

rings. Pouches can be worn in cradle or hip carries.

Benefits

- Easy to use
- Very portable
- High level of "portability" (baby can be "popped" in and out of carrier easily)
- Most can be worn from birth through toddlerhood
- Facilitates breastfeeding

Disadvantages

- Fitted pouches may not fit numerous caregivers
- Adjustable pouches can be bulky and difficult to adjust
- May not securely hold a child in vertical positions

Super Slings

Yvette Davis of Crete, Nebraska loves slings. "Baby can nap, nurse, sit up and when kiddo is older, slings can be used to help hold a toddler," says the mother of six. Slings are fabric carriers that fit over one shoulder and under the other arm, like a sash. They are adjusted by pulling the fabric through rings at the shoulder. Closed tail slings feature padded shoulders and a strap that can be pulled to adjust the sling. In open tail slings, the fabric passes through the rings instead of a strap. Slings can be used in cradle, front, back and hip carries.

Benefits

- Extremely versatile
- Usually very comfortable
- Open tail can be used for privacy while breastfeeding
- Some open tail slings feature a handy pocket
- Can be used from birth through toddlerhood
- Portable
- Facilitates breastfeeding

Disadvantages

- Slings with padded shoulders can be uncomfortable
- Open tail slings take a bit of practice to use
- Some users feel that slings put too much stress on one shoulder

Wonderful Wraps

"It's soft, comfortable and uses both of my shoulders and back for support," Becky Scott of San Diego says of her wrap carrier. Wraps are long pieces of



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cloth that are tied a particular way around the parent's body. They can be used in front, back, cradle and hip carries.

Benefits

- Extremely versatile
- Comfortable
- High degree of "portability"
- Can be used from birth through toddlerhood
- Once tied, can be worn all day
- Facilitates breastfeeding

Disadvantages

- Can be difficult to learn how to use
- Stretchy wraps won't support babies over 20 pounds
- Takes time to tie
- Can be uncomfortable on hot days

Learn More

Attachment Parenting International
www.attachmentparenting.org

Babywearing International
www.babywearinginternational.org

Help Give Us Slings (HUGS)
www.yuki-michelle.com/hugs

No Mother Left Behind
www.nomotherleftbehind.com

The Mamatoto Project, Inc
www.mamatoto.org

Babywearing by Mary Blois (Pharmasoft Publishing, 2005)

A Ride on Mother's Back: A Day of Baby Carrying around the World (children's book) by Emery Bernhard (Gulliver Books, 1996)

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