

Wearing Your Baby

by Pediatrician Dr William Sears - First Published in 'Mothering', Winter 1989

Dr William Sears, one of America's most renowned pediatricians, trained at Harvard Medical School's Children Hospital and the University of Toronto's Hospital for Children, the largest children's hospital in the world, where he was Assoc. Prof. of Pediatrics. He is the father of eight children and the author of more than twenty books.

New research is proving what experienced parents have long known - that something good happens to parents and infants when they are attached. Infant development specialists who travel throughout the world studying infant care practices have repeatedly observed that babies who are carried in a variety of cloth-type slings seem more content than those who are transported in plastic carriers, strollers, and prams. Which is better, to be worn or to be wheeled? My experience with new mothers and fathers in my pediatric practice strongly suggests that baby-wearing enhances not only the baby's development but also the parents' overall enjoyment of the baby.

My personal interest in the art of baby carrying began several years ago while doing research in preparation for my book 'The Fussy Baby'. I noticed that the more babies were carried, the less they cried. Mothers with fussy babies would calmly say, "As long as I carry him, he's content!" Based upon these observations, I advised parents to begin carrying their babies as much as possible right after birth. I then noticed that exciting things were happening to carried babies and their parents.

Over a period of three years I studied mothers who wore their babies at least several hours a day. I observed that carrying greatly improved the behavior of their babies. Carried infants cried much less, showed fewer colicky episodes, and in general, seemed more content. As the babies became more content, their parents became more content. Parents who carried their babies also seemed able to read their babies' cues. In essence, parent and baby appeared to be more in harmony with one another.

The Benefits

Carried infants cry less. Carrying creates an environment that lessens the babies' need to cry. First, it organizes the baby. Newborns come disorganized: their movements are random and jerky, and most of the cues they give to their parents seem purposeless and hard to decode. The settling effect of carrying is probably due to its influence on the vestibular system, which is located behind each eardrum. This system is similar to three tiny carpenter's levels: one oriented for side-to-side balance, another for up-and-down balance, and the third for back-and-forth balance. Every time a person moves, the fluid in these "levels" moves against tiny hairlike filaments that vibrate and send nerve impulses throughout the muscles of the body. For example, if you lean far over to one side, the vestibular system signals you to lean back to the other side to stay in balance. A baby who is carried moves in all three of these directions, and the opposing motion keeps the baby's body in balance.

Carrying also soothes the baby by recreating the motions of life in the womb. The vestibular system of the preborn baby is constantly stimulated because the fetus is in almost continuous motion. The baby is therefore born with a highly sensitive vestibular system programmed to expect movement. Because carrying reminds baby of the womb, it

provides a sense of contentment. For these reasons, motion, and not stillness, is the normal state for newborns.

Carrying helps babies thrive. All babies grow, but not all babies thrive. Thriving means growing to one's fullest potential. I believe that carried babies thrive better because of the energy-sparing effect of reduced crying: a baby who uses less energy for crying has more left over for growing. Highest on my hit list of medical myths to disprove is the all-too-prevalent belief that it is good for a baby to cry. Crying is good for the lungs like bleeding is good for the veins. Prolonged crying serves absolutely no purpose, and in fact, prolonged crying may have harmful effects on baby's heart rate, blood pressure, blood oxygen, and overall physiology.

Carried babies learn better. Carried babies show enhanced visual alertness and appear to be more tuned in to their environment. Why? Because a baby who is carried more cries less and therefore spends more time in a state of quiet alertness (also called interactive quiet). This is the behavioral state in which a baby is most receptive to interacting with and learning from the environment. Increasing the time a baby spends in a state of quiet alertness is one of the best ways we can help babies learn.

What do carried babies learn? First, they become accustomed to their parents' bodily movements. They become deeply aware of their parents' facial expressions, walking rhythms, voices, and scents. They also learn to be intimately involved in their parents' world because they participate in what mother and father are doing. A baby worn while mom or dad washes dishes, for example, hears, smells, sees, and experiences the adult world in depth. Very simply, with increased exposure comes increased involvement. In the midst of the recent publicity on infant stimulation and super-baby classes, the simple art of baby-wearing seems to be one of the most natural modes of infant stimulation.

Baby-wearing fits in well with busy lifestyles. Mothers in other cultures have fabricated various sling-type carriers because it is necessary to carry their babies with them when they work or when they are on the go. Mothers in Western cultures are also on the go - they just "go" differently. For example, my wife Martha, mother of our six children, is a lactation consultant and teaches breastfeeding classes. One day, just before a seminar, Matthew, who was then six months old, developed an ill-timed fussy period. Not wishing to cancel her class, but more strongly not wanting to leave Matthew during a high-need period, Martha wore him in our sling while delivering a one-hour lecture to 150 pediatricians. After mother and baby finished their talk on parenting styles, a doctor came up to Martha and exclaimed, "What you did made more of an impression than what you said!"

Many mothers who have part-time jobs outside the home have been able to wear their babies at work. Such outside jobs as selling real estate, shopkeeping, sales, demonstrations of products, and many others lend themselves well to baby-wearing. Janice, a mother whose home business involves cleaning houses a few hours a day, wears her baby in a sling while doing the housework. She calls this style of juggling her two professions "work and wear."

Busy fathers can wear babies too! As the father of six and a certified baby-wearer, I am convinced that it is important for baby to get used to father's handling. It is not better than mom's, not less than mom's, but different from mom's. Babies enjoy this different sort of stimulation. The vibration of a father's deep voice talking and singing to the baby he is carrying often lulls a fussy baby back to sleep.

Baby-wearing helps busy parents get to know their babies intimately. The more one knows one's baby, the more comfortable one is adjusting to parenthood, and the more comfortable one is, the greater one's enjoyment of parenting. When you and your baby travel as a unit, you get used to wearing your baby. You feel right when together and unright when separate. You become adept at reading your baby's cues, and your baby becomes adept at reading yours. Baby-wearing helps an active mother-and-baby or father-and-baby get to know each other well because they both move together.

Keeping the baby in a protective yet interesting enclosure is especially valuable when visiting unfamiliar or unsafe environments. The sling can serve as a shield to protect your baby's eyes from inappropriate sights or scenes that might frighten an impressionable young mind. Even a curious toddler visiting a strange home or busy supermarket will appreciate the safety and interest provided by being in your arms.

Baby-wearing eases sleeping, breastfeeding, and high-need situations. I have noticed that babies who are worn a lot during the day tend to sleep better at night, probably due to the general organizing effect of carrying. They also tend to sleep better during the day. Here is a sleep tip for parents of a reluctant napper: A baby at any age will fall asleep in a sling. You can either keep wearing your baby during naptime (some babies need this) or lay your baby down. To transfer a sleeping baby, lean over the bedding (or lie down yourself), gently settle the baby there, ease the shoulder portion of the sling over your head, and carefully slip yourself out, leaving baby nestled within the warmth of the sling.

The sling also enhances a harmonious feeding relationship. With more and more mothers returning to breastfeeding, this style of baby-wearing enables them to discreetly nurse their babies as needed. The sling functions as part of mother's apparel and can therefore be used as a fashionable cover-up while nursing in public. Using the sling, Martha has even breastfed our baby on national television.

Some babies need to be worn more than others. High-need babies (a nicer term than "fussy babies") have a tendency to stiffen, arch, and perform "back dives" while held; however, they settle quite nicely when worn. They seem to profit from the bending positions involved in carrying, and they enjoy the closeness of being wrapped around mother or father's body. Parents are best able to cope with high-need situations when they remember that the total "gestation" of a baby is an 18-month period of time: nine months carried inside the womb by mom and nine more months worn outside the womb by mom or dad.

Baby-wearing is a style of parenting that requires us to change our mindset about what babies are really like. It reverses our view of infancy - from "down" babies to "up" babies. The picture-book baby is a down baby - one who lies quietly in a crib, gazing passively at dangling mobiles, and is picked up to be comforted, fed, and played with. These up periods function as dutiful intervals for quieting a baby long enough to be able to put him or her down again. The baby who is carried most of the time is an up baby--one who is only put down for short intervals while parents attend to their own needs, during naptime, and for sleeptime. Some down periods also provide floor freedom for exploring the necessary freestyle movements that babies love to do. Down babies learn to cry to get picked up; up babies learn noncrying body language to signal the need to get down. As one mother who wears her baby a lot claims, "My baby seldom cries. She doesn't have to."

Some parents worry that baby-wearing may result in overly dependent babies, a diminished desire to crawl, or "spoiled" behaviors. On the contrary, in our experience and that of others, carried babies actually turn out to be more secure and more

independent. Because they have grown through early infancy with a secure home base, these children learn to separate more easily than others and with little separation anxiety. Nor do carried babies show diminished motor development. In fact, carrying may actually enhance a baby's overall neurological development: the energy-sparing effect of reduced crying and the calming effect of the motion seem to contribute to a more organized neuromuscular system and a well-developed motor capacity. Concerning spoiling, one mother who wears her baby put it this way: "She's not spoiled, she's fresh!"

This style of parenting requires not only a shift in perspective but also a balanced approach. Parents must be willing to put their babies down sometimes to attend to their personal needs and in accordance with their babies' needs. The baby's overall growth and development is best served by carrying baby as much as possible when baby wants to be carried and yet taking cues from the baby when he or she wants to be put down. The amount of carrying usually decreases with age and acquisition of motor skills. This balanced approach extends into the toddler years. Although the amount of wearing time lessens as baby gets older, high-need periods do still arise. Baby-wearing is especially beneficial during these times, when incessant whining or pulling at your clothing may serve as a pick-me-up cue. A toddler wants to be part of the action, and the action is up where mom and dad are.

It is important to realize that this style of parenting does not imply being restrictive or possessive regarding a child's development. Quite the opposite, since possessiveness means keeping the baby from doing what he or she needs to do because of some parental need. As parents become more experienced in this form of baby care, they will intuitively know when the baby needs to be carried and when the baby needs to be put down.

One intriguing side effect of baby-wearing is that it models a style of parenting for young children. As Martha and I began wearing our babies, we noticed that our children began wearing their dolls in little, homemade sling-type carriers. We also noticed also that our children began drawing mothers and babies as units, as though the mother and baby were one person or as though the baby were an extension of the mother. What a valuable lesson we are modeling for our next generation of parents when we rediscover the lost art of baby-wearing.