

"If You Hold That Baby All The Time..." (abridged version)

by Pam Leo

Pam Leo is a Parent Educator in Gorham, Maine. She has been a student and teacher of human development for more than 25 years. She is a mother, a grandmother, a parent educator, childbirth educator, a doula, a feature writer for Parent & Family, a motivational speaker on parenting and birth, and a sponsor of community education events. Her life work is to "help create a society in which all parents have the information, resources and support to raise children who can realize the promise of their potential." For more information visit www.connectionparenting.com

"The single most important child rearing practice to be adopted for the development of emotional and social healthy infants and children is to carry the newborn/infant on the body of the mother/caretaker all day long..." - James Prescott, Ph.D.

Contrary to what we have been taught to believe, research shows that babies who are held and carried all the time and get their need for touch well-met in their first year do not become clingy and overly dependent. They cry much less and they grow to become happier, more intelligent, more independent, more loving and more social than babies who spend much of their infancy in infant seats, swings, cribs, and all the other plastic baby-holding gadgets that don't provide babies with human contact. We had all those baby-holders for my granddaughter and she spent a little time in all of them, but she spent most of her infancy in her sling because she was happiest there, and we loved carrying her and being close to her.

Many new parents buy a sling or receive one as a gift and end up not using it because they can't figure out how to get themselves and the baby comfortable. I've heard parents say they tried a sling once, but the baby didn't like it so they just never used it again. In other cultures, parents naturally know how to use slings, because as children they grew up seeing slings used, and wearing their siblings in slings. Since slings are new to our culture, anyone just being introduced to using a sling will usually need someone to show them how to get themselves and the baby comfortable. Since I am passionate about the use of baby slings - based on both my research and my personal experience - I often demonstrate the use of slings in my parenting classes. Parents are thrilled when they learn how comfortable and convenient it can be to meet their baby's needs and still do all the other things they need to do.

Slings are different than front carriers. A sling is like a hammock. From newborn to the sitting-up stage, babies' spines are best supported in slings because their weight is distributed along the length of the spine. Front carriers that hold the infant upright with their legs hanging down, can stress the spine because they put all the baby's weight at the base of the spine.

There are many styles and brands of slings. It is helpful to try several and have someone who is comfortable using each one show you how to use it. If you aren't comfortable, your baby won't be either. The two most important things I tell parents about using a sling are: 1) if the baby's bottom is below your belly button, the sling is too low and your back will hurt; 2) each time you put the baby in the sling, you will need to walk around until the baby settles in. Babies like and need movement.

When we wear/carry a baby, we are providing more than the comfort of the sound of our heartbeat and voice and the touch and warmth of our body. According to research by

James Prescott, a developmental neuropsychologist and cross cultural psychologist, "vestibular-cerebellar stimulation (which happens when we carry our babies) is the most important sensory system for the development of "basic trust" in the affectionate bonding between mother and infant. It establishes the biological and psychological foundations for all other human relationships." We have learned that carrying infants is a vital part of nature's biological plan for mother-infant bonding, and that it is critical to the development of trust, empathy, compassion and conscience. Carrying or wearing an infant in a sling, keeping the infant in constant human contact, and breast feeding on demand are the biological design for optimal physical, intellectual and emotional human development. Research confirms that carrying human infants develops their intelligence and their capacity for trust, affection, intimacy, and love and happiness. Anthropologist Ashley Montagu refers to this carrying stage, or "in arms" period, as the "external gestation period" the infant needs to complete his/her development.

Recently when I was demonstrating the use of a sling in a parenting workshop, one of the fathers shared the following story. On one of his trips to the island of Haiti, a very distraught father came to the hospital carrying a newborn whose mother had died in childbirth. The father's biggest concern was "who will carry this baby". It is unlikely that this baby's father had read the scientific research on the importance of carrying babies. Yet he knew it was what his baby needed most. The father in my workshop told of his amazement at seeing many children there who had barely enough to eat, few clothes, no shoes, no toys, and yet were some of the happiest children he had ever seen. As babies these children were carried all day long as part of the natural and loving parenting practiced in their culture.

For decades, we have been taught to believe that holding babies too much "spoils" them, even though in much of the rest of the world, babies are and always have been carried or worn in a sling all day until they could walk. In cross-cultural studies of child rearing practices, James Prescott found that the countries that are the least violent are the countries where babies are constantly carried or worn on the body of the mother/caregiver. The United States has the highest rate of crime and violence in the world and it has the lowest number of constantly carried babies in the world. Is there a connection here?

Meeting our infant's biological need for human contact is not about following a particular parenting philosophy. It is about honouring and adhering to nature's biological plan for optimum human development. Keeping our infants in almost constant human contact for nine to twelve months may sound like an impossible goal in modern society. Sleeping with our infants provides that contact at night. Holding them or wearing them in a sling will give them more of the human contact they need. Now that research has shown that holding babies does not "spoil" them, but is, in fact, what they need most, we would be wise to listen to our hearts and "hold that baby all the time."

For more information on Pam Leo or her workshops, visit www.connectionparenting.com

"If You Hold That Baby All The Time..." © 1989-2007 by Pam Leo and Connection Parenting (™)
