

Hold your Baby Close to your Heart – the many benefits of babywearing

by Anita Lincolne-Lomax

What is Babywearing?

There is nothing in the world that compares to having your baby in your arms – the feeling of your sleeping child against your chest, the sweet smelling downy head under your nose. These are moments every mother holds dear in those early newborn days. But life goes on, there are errands to run and things to do. Babywearing allows a busy parent the freedom to continue their normal daily routine while providing the richest and most desirable environment for their child. It is an instinctive parenting style where a baby is held close to the parent or caregiver in a sling or baby carrier. While babywearing is not a new concept in many parts of the world, it is rapidly gaining popularity in western cultures. So, what are the advantages of babywearing?

The Benefits of Babywearing – for Babies

Emotional Benefits

- **Less Crying means a Healthier Baby**

Babywearing tells children that they are loved, safe, secured and cared for. Studies have shown that the more babies are held, the less they cry.¹ One study found that allowing babies to cry unnecessarily alters the nervous system by flooding the developing brain with stress hormones and adrenalin. This sets up a pattern of over sensitivity in the baby which may predispose them to stress disorders in adulthood.²

- **Happy, Calm and Content**

After birth, a baby held in a sling will feel reassured by the presence of their mother's body rhythms. The familiarity of her heartbeat, body temperature, body smell and breathing patterns will create a smooth transition from womb to world. A randomised controlled test reported in *Paediatrics* showed that carrying babies reduces crying and fussiness 43% during the day and 51% at night.

Cognitive Benefits

- **Babies in a Sling Learn Better**

A happy baby is quiet and alert. In this state of mind, he is ready to interact with people and his environment. Babywearing offers babies the optimum position to experience the richness of the new world around them within the safety of a parent's arms.

- **Baby is on Your Level**

A carried baby shares equality with its caregiver as it physically on the same level. A baby in a pram has less equality and experiences the parent looking down on it.

¹ Hunziker UA, Barr RG.1986. "Increased carrying reduces infant crying: A randomised controlled trial." *Pediatrics* 77:641-648

² Powell A., "Children need touching and attention, Harvard researchers say." *Harvard Gazette* April 9, 1998.

Physiological Benefits

- **Babywearing Stimulates a Baby's Physical Development**

The act of touching a baby actually stimulates growth hormones.³ Babywearing also stimulates a baby's vestibular system, the parts of the inner ear that work like levels or sensors to control the body's sense of balance. The stimulation regulates a baby's physiology, increasing their cardiac output and circulation and promotes respiration.⁴

- **Sling Babies are Stronger Babies**

Developmental neurologists have discovered that the child of a mother who moves every day while pregnant shows clear developmental advantages. This is the same with a carried child who also develops greater physical and nerve strength.⁵

- **Sling Babies Sleep Better**

Holding a baby in a sling for the majority of the day encourages the development of a baby's sleep/wake cycles. Babies begin to distinguish external cues which help to develop a baby's circadian rhythms. Babywearing promotes deeper, longer and more peaceful sleep cycles, vital for brain maturation.

- **Babywearing Makes Breastfeeding Easier**

Babywearing offers constant and easy access to the infant's food source, the mother's breast. Such ease of access allows a mother to feed her baby on demand rather than follow unnecessarily strict feeding routines, thereby reducing the potential of breast infection.⁶ The increased skin to skin contact enjoyed by babywearers also stimulates breastmilk supply.

- **Babywearing Helps Digestion and Eases Colic**

Baby slings and carriers afford a baby a more upright position which promotes digestion. A baby's tummy is massaged through the act of babywearing which also promotes bowel elimination. The acupressure points against problems of digestion or sleep, which are located on the belly and on the lower insides of the thighs, are automatically massaged through babywearing.⁷

The Benefits of Babywearing – for Parents and Caregivers

- **Happy Baby, Happy Mama**

A parent is likely to feel more at ease and confident and able to enjoy their new baby when he/she is settled. Baby carriers offer skin to skin contact which stimulates levels of the mothering hormone Prolactin which increases a mother's desire to hold and nurture her baby. Dads can also enjoy carrying their babies, thereby extending his baby's in-utero experience.

- **Babywearing Helps You and Your Baby Communicate**

Good parent-infant bonding gives the parent greater confidence and develops their intuitive sensitivity. This heightened perception allows parents to read their baby's cues and

³ Conde-Agudelo A, Diaz-Rossello JL, Balizan JM. 2003 "Kangaroo Mother care to reduce morbidity and mortality in low birthweight infants. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev* (2): CD002771

⁴ Sears, Bill and Martha. *The Baby Book: Everything you need to know about your baby from birth to two*. 2003

⁵ Dr. Eckhard Bonnet (specialist in paediatrics, youth medicine, environmental medicine and sports medicine). 1998. *Krankengymnastik* 50 Jg No.8

⁶ U.C.L.A Lactation Dept Study. 1988

⁷ Dr. Eckhard Bonnet (specialist in paediatrics, youth medicine, environmental medicine and sports medicine). 1998. *Krankengymnastik* 50 Jg No.8

anticipate their needs and moods. This increased sense of control promotes a calmness which can actually be sensed by the baby - a calm parent actually smells different!⁸.

- **Babywearing is Healthy for You!**

A good carrier offers parents hands-free freedom, allowing them to enjoy an active lifestyle indoors or outdoors. Parents' muscular strength also develops in relation to the baby's growing weight.

- **Babywearing Reduces Risk of Post-Natal Depression**

Babywearing helps parents balance their needs with those of their baby. Baby carriers help prevent life becoming completely dictated by baby. This sense of personal freedom and flexibility may well reduce the potential risk of post-natal depression which is often associated with being housebound and missing out on much-needed social interactions.

My Personal Experience

Amongst other things, becoming a babywearing parent provided a turning point in my career. My passion for "slinging" shifted me from a design profession into a home-based business called 'Babes in Arms'. I specialise in baby carriers from all over the world and advocate the benefits of babywearing through maternity hospitals and health professionals throughout Australia. It is my dream to encourage mothers from all walks of life and of all parenting styles, to reclaim the joy and freedom offered by the ancient tradition of Babywearing.

For More Information

Please contact Anita if you would like copies of our one-page summary of this article for your playgroup, mother's group or maternity hospital ante-natal class etc.

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