

Babywearing:

The Benefits of Carrying Your Baby in a Sling

On the community college campus where I teach, I am “the lady with the baby.” At my local grocery store, the staff knows me as “the woman who carries the baby all the time.” Complete strangers often stop me to ask, “Is that comfortable?” when they see me with my son tucked into a pouch or nestled into a mei tai. And yet, I did not set out to become a babywearing mom. In fact, if you’d asked me about it before my first son was born, I would probably have voiced the same skepticism I sometimes get from people. But four years and two sons have taught me the benefits of babywearing—for me and for my children—and now, I can’t imagine doing it any other way.

Before my older son, Michael, was born, my knowledge of babywearing was limited to an awareness of the Baby Bjorn carrier I sometimes saw on parents of infants. I thought that such a thing might be handy but assumed that I’d rely far more on the car seat and the stroller. However, my assumptions began changing almost immediately after Michael’s birth. After nine months of waiting, I didn’t ever want to put him down! It felt comfortable and natural to have him in my arms; even the brief ride home from the hospital seemed like too long to let go.

If my desire for physical closeness wasn’t enough, my early experiences with the carseat were enough to push me over the edge. I am a very small mom (4’11”, 94 pounds soaking wet). When I lifted the carseat by its handle, I had about three inches of clearance, not to mention the awkward, painful angle required to keep the seat from banging into my legs. Additionally, the seat with newborn occupant in place equaled about a third of my weight. What would happen, I wondered, when he started to grow? Could I attach a small skateboard underneath?

After a few days of carseat torture, I bought a Baby Bjorn, and life started to improve immediately. Michael was warm, safe, and comfortable, and I was no longer leaning to the right. Not only did it work when I needed to go out, but wearing him around the house allowed me the comfort of constant closeness without abandoning all tasks that required two hands.

Around the world, babywearing is far more common than we realize here in the U.S., and the benefits for both parents and children are substantial. Babies who spend more time in close physical contact with their caregivers cry less and develop better, both physically and cognitively. Physically, the stimulation of contact, as well as the constantly changing position of the adult caretaker, ensures more stimulation and development of the vestibular system, which helps babies become more organized, more quickly. Cognitively, a baby who is worn experiences much more of the world than a baby hanging at knee-level in a carseat or isolated in a stroller. And as most babywearing moms will attest, a cloth baby carrier is far more convenient, comfortable, and portable than either a carseat or stroller. Mothers who wear young infants in pouch-style carriers are also often able to nurse without changing baby’s position; in fact, the people around them are often unaware that the baby is nursing at all.

In recent years, more and more research has been conducted that details the benefits of attachment parenting, of which babywearing is one component. *The Baby Book*, by William and Martha Sears not only mentions babywearing, it had its own whole chapter! In *Our Babies, Ourselves*, Dr. Meredith Small concludes that keeping babies close has clear benefits for development. And in *The Vital Touch*, Dr. Sharon Heller looks at the ways nurturing touch contributes to children’s development, and how their absence may create or intensify problems.

But where does a parent new to babywearing begin? An easy online starting point is www.TheBabywearer.com. This site provides information and research, lists vendors, explains the types of carriers available, and offers discussion forums that can address any question or concern you might have. Attachment Parenting International (www.attachmentparenting.org) has local support groups around the country. API groups and leaders are a great source of support and information for new babywearing parents. And La Leche League International (www.llli.org) also has many local leaders who are experienced with babywearing.

I did not plan ahead for babywearing, but I am forever grateful that I embraced it when my oldest son was an infant. Wearing my son kept us close and allowed me to continue with many of my usual activities. As he grew, I transitioned from the Baby Bjorn to a pouch-style sling, which then became a hip carrier. I wore him at least some of the time until he was more than two, and it made life easier for both of us. The real payoff, though, came with the birth of my second son, now five months old. An old hand by the time he was born, I had no qualms about strapping him on and returning to teaching just five days after birth, and he is certainly the best looking teaching assistant I’ve ever had. If he fusses while he’s on my bed or in his basket, my older son, now four, is quick to say, “Mommy, our baby wants to be in his sling.” I love that he thinks of a fussing baby as an aberration, and a cause for action, rather than a source of irritation. And I hope that my “baby accessory” at school serves as a reminder to my students and colleagues that babies can be a routine part of an active life.

