

"If You Hold That Baby All The Time..."

by Pam Leo

"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.

Every mother who has ever had a baby shower has probably heard someone say, "I wish they had made something like that when I had my babies." For some reason, it always annoyed me to hear that and I vowed I would never say that to any expectant mother about any new baby gadget. I kept my vow until my first grandchild was born. By then I had done so much research on the importance of carrying babies and the benefits of keeping them in close physical contact, I knew we had to have a sling to carry this baby. I wanted my grandchild to have the holding my own children didn't get enough of, because I was taught to believe it would spoil them.

I ordered "The New Native" baby carrier from an ad in *Mothering*. Since we all lived together, I had lots of opportunities to see my daughter "wearing" my granddaughter, and I had lots of opportunity to wear her myself. I was able to learn first-hand what I had read about "babywearing". She nursed in her sling, and she napped in her sling. She was totally content and I still had both hands free to do whatever I needed to do.

What a win-win: happy baby, happy caregiver. Unless she was hungry and only nursing could meet her need, carrying her in the sling would always make her happy, whether it was Mom or Dad or Grandma doing the carrying. Wearing your baby in a sling completely transforms the experience of parenting an infant.

Now slings could hardly be called "new baby gadgets," since they have been used in many other cultures around the world for millions for years. However, in North America, they are something new. Whenever one of us was wearing my granddaughter in a public place, people would always stop to ask us about the sling and marvel at this great "new" way of carrying babies. Babies want and need to be "in arms" and they let us know that. A baby crying in a stroller usually becomes content as soon as he or she is picked up and held. I often see parents carrying a baby in one arm and struggling to push an empty stroller with the other!

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. While "The New Native Baby Carrier" is my personal favorite, the best sling is the one you are most comfortable wearing. 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.