

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 affectional 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. There is even a brand of sling called "Womb with A View."

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 honoring 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."

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 on attending her workshops or scheduling a workshop for your place of business, contact her at (207) 839-6478.