



Sling Myths

Rosie Knowles discusses common worries and myths surrounding babywearing

The first humans carried babies in slings so that they could travel easily in their nomadic lifestyle.

This is believed to have contributed to the increasing size of the human brain.¹

Many cultures around the world still carry their children as part of their daily routine. Babywearing (a term coined by the paediatrician William Sears) is a phenomenon gaining popularity in the Western world as parents explore how to combine close relationships with freedom to get around easily.

Fourth Trimester Theory suggests that the first three months in the outside world, when babies are still extremely vulnerable, are simply an extension of life in the womb – being gently rocked, able to hear their mother’s voice, never in need of anything, gently compressed all around. Using a sling can be one way of meeting a baby’s need for closeness and contact, rather than leaving her flailing unheld in a wide-open space, cold and exposed. We all know how cradling a crying baby on our chest brings instant reassurance. Kangaroo care is well known to make a huge difference to the growth and development of tiny babies, and the benefits of such close contact are believed to extend far beyond the early months, encouraging confident, secure, independent children later in life.

ARE SLINGS REALLY SAFE?

This is a common fear experienced by new parents, especially when the media share tragic stories of suffocation occurring in slings. Such stories are usually limited in their information, out of respect for the families of those involved. In the last 20 years there have been just over twenty recorded deaths in slings, mostly crescent-shaped ‘bag-style’ slings where the baby was in a horizontal cradled position with a compromised airway.² The greatest risk is to babies under 4 months of age. Manufacturers’ manuals can often be out of date according to current best practice, or fail to include appropriate safety information.

A sling is just like any other piece of baby equipment and needs to be used correctly to be safe. Pushchair accidents can occur too: Graco was forced to recall 2 million pushchairs in 2010 due to strangulation deaths resulting from incorrect usage.

The majority of slings and carriers are indeed safe when used in accordance with the industry safety guidelines.³ It is vital to protect the baby’s airway by encouraging a snug, upright position, ensuring that his chin is off his chest and his breathing is unimpaired. The baby’s spine should be supported properly in its natural gentle curve to avoid slumping. Using a sling in this way mimics the natural in-arms carrying position and is very safe, especially as your baby will be close enough for you to notice and respond quickly to any change in his breathing.⁴

Being able to use a sling safely and competently can be life-changing for many families, improving bonding, reducing crying and colic, and aiding communication and freedom to get around. There is an ever-increasing number of resources for help and guidance: sling meets, sling libraries and trained consultants can give people the confidence they need.⁵

ARE SLINGS BAD FOR PEOPLE'S BACKS?

Ergonomic, well-designed carriers aim to ensure that the baby’s weight is well distributed around the whole body. They also encourage an optimum carrying position (usually facing the wearer, snug and high up, with the baby’s legs wrapped around the wearer’s body), which makes an enormous difference. Many people are able to happily and comfortably carry heavy toddlers for hours in such carriers, as the child is not hanging off their body. More padding and more structure do not always mean more comfort; again, it is all about equal and even weight distribution.

You will not need to stop carrying once your baby is 6 months, or 16 months, if you both enjoy it and wish to carry on. You may need to change the sling you use as your baby grows, to ensure a good comfortable fit and weight distribution.

ARE SLINGS HEALTHY FOR BABIES' HIPS?

Some people worry about carriers spreading a baby’s legs too wide, and others worry about narrow-based carriers potentially causing hip dysplasia. Both fears are unfounded.

A young baby is usually most happy to be carried with her pelvis tucked up, knees above her bottom, and hips flexed and slightly open (no more than 60 degrees), a position that ensures that the ball-and-socket joint is optimally aligned, with minimal stress. This ‘spread-squat’ position is natural and comfortable (and is most easily seen during nappy changes), which is why a soft sling that can mould around a baby to encourage it can be among the most useful choices in the early months, not least because it also helps to protect the baby’s airway and support her spine.

This position will be more comfortable for your baby than one where the weight of his legs hangs unsupported for long periods of time. Such narrow-based carriers are not harmful in the majority of cases, and do not cause hip dysplasia, a condition that, if it occurs, will be present at birth, but they may not be the most hip-healthy option, or the most comfortable one for baby or parent. The spread-squat is a position encouraged by most ergonomically designed carriers.

DO SLINGS CREATE CLINGY CHILDREN?

You might hear: “You’ll spoil her, carrying her around. She’ll never be independent.” In fact, there is a wealth of evidence that children who have strong, positive attachment relationships in their early years are more confident and secure in later life. Ongoing studies support John Bowlby’s work on attachment theory and its impact on mental health, concluding that carried babies do indeed seem to be more securely attached⁶ and better able to cope with their future lives.⁷ It is not the sling itself that matters, but the contact and closeness; the interaction and time spent together sharing the world. A good sling can be a great tool in helping this to happen. Once your child is able to explore the world independently, this secure attachment will give her confident freedom; many sling users bemoan how little their toddlers still want to be carried!

WHAT'S THE FUSS ABOUT FORWARD FACING?

There is a lot of discussion about narrow-based high-street slings in which small babies are carried facing out, and this can be confusing to new parents. Generally, forward facing out may not be ideal, because there is no head support for young babies (and in fact, most carrier manufacturers suggest they should not be used before a baby has sustained head control, usually at four months or over). These carriers do not support the baby’s hips in a healthy position. This may be tolerable for a short while, however, and some carriers allow the baby to be turned round to face in for comfortable, supported sleeping on the wearer’s chest.

Facing out reduces communication and shared experience. Babies learn about the world and how to respond to it based on the cues they pick up from the people they trust; and they learn to communicate from watching others and participating. Spending a lot of time close to a parent and being able to see the parent’s face and hear the parent’s voice is a very valuable part of a baby’s development. That said, some babies really enjoy facing out, and it may be an option for a brief period of time, as long as the parent is alert and responsive to cues of tiredness and overstimulation.

SLING STEREOTYPES

There is a perception that parents who carry their children are hippies, have chosen to parent in non-mainstream ways, never use a pushchair, or have a particular preference for fabric wraps over buckle carriers. Using a sling can also be perceived as a middle-class pursuit for those with plenty of money. Both are far from the truth. Anyone can be a babywearer if they carry their child in a sling, be it occasionally, or every day. It is easy to find good carriers to suit a wide range of budgets and needs.

There is no right or wrong way to carry your baby – and it can be as much or as little as you like. Babies love to be carried and they thrive when they are carried, with huge benefits to the whole family. A good sling can make this process easier and more comfortable. Sling use can be of great help to those struggling with post-natal depression and is a wonderful way of making new friends. Many find a great sense of community in their local sling group. If you like the idea, carry your baby and enjoy it! ●

Rosie Knowles is a mum of two, a GP, and a Sling and Carrier Consultant. She runs Sheffield Sling Surgery and Library. sheffieldslingsurgery.wordpress.com

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