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WEARING BABY IN A SLING A baby carrier will be your most useful fuss-preventing tool. Infant development researchers who study baby-care practices in America and other cultures are unanimous in reporting: infants who are carried more cry less. In fact, research has shown that babies who are carried at least three hours a day cry forty percent less than infants who aren't carried as much. Over the years in pediatric practice, I have listened and watched veteran baby-calmer and heard a recurrent theme: "As long as I have my baby in my arms or on my body she's content." This observation led us to popularize the term "babywearing." "Wearing" means more than just picking up baby and putting him in a carrier when he fusses. It means carrying baby many hours a day before baby needs to fuss. This means the carrier you choose must be easy to use and versatile. (We have found the sling-type carrier to be the most conducive to babywearing. Baby becomes like part of your apparel, and you can easily wear your baby in a sling at least several hours a day.) Mothers who do this tell us: "My baby seems to forget to fuss." The sling is not only helpful for high-need babies it's essential. Here's why babywearing works:

The outside womb. Being nestled in the arms, against the chest, and near the parent's face gives baby the most soothing of all environments. Mother's walking motion "reminds" baby of the rhythm he enjoyed while in the womb. The sling encircles and contains the infant who would otherwise waste energy flinging his arms and legs around, randomly attempting to settle himself. The worn baby is only a breath away from his parent's voice, the familiar sound he has grown to associate with feeling good. Babies settle better in this "live" environment than they do when parked in swings or plastic infant seats.

Sights aplenty. Being up in arms gives baby a visual advantage. He now can have a wider view of his world. Up near adult eye level, there are more visual attractions to distract baby from fussing. The distressed infant can now pick from a wide array of ever-changing scenery—select what delights him, and shut out what disturbs him. And seen from such a secure perch, even the disturbing sights soon become interesting rather than frightening.

Instant replay. The expanding mind of a growing infant is like a video library containing thousands of tapes. These tapes record behavior patterns that baby has learned to anticipate as either soothing or disturbing. Babywearing mothers tell us: "As soon as I put on the sling, my baby's face lights up with delight, and he stops fussing." The scene of mother putting on the sling triggers a replay in baby's mind of all the pleasant memories she's experienced in mother's arms, and she can anticipate the pleasant interaction that is soon to follow. She stops fussing. She's no longer bored.

SUCKING ON THE MOVE. Sometimes motion alone won't calm a frantic baby; she needs an additional relaxation inducer. Settle baby in a carrier and, while walking or dancing, offer baby the breast, bottle, or pacifier. Motion and sucking are a winning combination that settles even the most upset baby.

Makes life easier for parents. Not only is babywearing good for the infant, it's good for the mother as well. The carrier gives you a comforting tool that usually works. After baby gets used to being worn and you get used to wearing baby, you have more options and more mobility. You'll feel as though you've gained an extra pair of hands, especially around the house, and you can go more places. Baby is content, since "home" to a tiny baby is being with mom, even though mom may be in the middle of a busy shopping center or at a party full of adults.

A baby who fusses less is more fun to be with, and drains less energy from the parents. Infants and parents can then direct the energy they would have wasted on managing a fussy baby into growing and interacting. That's why carried babies thrive—as do their parents.

Familiarity breeds contentment. Living in a carrier keeps infants content because it keeps them in constant contact with the familiar sounds, touches, movements, and visual delights of the parents. Being nestled in a familiar position is especially calming for the baby who is easily distracted and falls apart at the first sight of a strange person or place. The worn baby is always surrounded by things he knows. From this secure homebase, the baby has less fear of the unfamiliar—and adjusts without a fuss.

Proximity fosters calmness. A baby who is worn is in mother's arms and literally right under her face. With this close proximity, mother can teach baby to cry "better." As soon as baby gives a hint that he is about to fuss, mother, because she is right there, can preempt the cry and keep it from escalating into an all-out fit. Being close to your baby helps you learn to read your baby's pre-cry signals so that you can intervene to meet baby's needs before he has to fuss. Baby in turn learns to be more at ease using non-crying modes of signaling since, during babywearing, he has learned that these signals receive an immediate nurturing response.

Babywearing and daycare. Carrie had a high-need baby who was content as long as he was in a sling, but she had to return to work when Evan was six-weeks-old. I wrote the following "prescription" to give to her daycare provider:

Rx. To keep Evan content: Wear him in the babysling at least three hours a day.
-- William Sears, M.D.

How to wear your baby in a sling. Some mothers take to babywearing like a duck takes to water; others may initially find the sling awkward. Also, some babies at first have difficulty settling in the sling. Perhaps they find it too confining. For the best long-term results, get your baby used to being worn in the first week of life, so that she soon realizes that the sling is where she belongs. It takes some practice, but the sling will soon become your norm of infant care. Take lessons from veteran parents who have logged many miles wearing their babies in a sling in various carrying positions and in many circumstances. Find one of these experts to show you how to wear the sling so it's most comfortable for you and most settling for baby. Keep experimenting with various positions until you find one that works; the favorite position may change with baby's moods and motor development. Most high-need babies prefer to be carried in the forward-facing position.

For a busy parent of a fussy infant, a baby sling will be one of your most indispensable infant-care items. You won't get dressed without it.

Babywearing Story

"I thought for sure I would have a baby who slept through the night, in his crib, in his room, and that he would awake only to feed and to get his diaper changed. How naive! Jason knew what kind of parenting he needed right from the start. He was truly a fussy baby, and we nicknamed him "More." He screamed if I put him down even to get dressed. He seemed to nurse constantly, and he rarely slept. As long as he was in my arms or nestled on my husband's chest, he was content, happy, and alert. Any deviation from that was a disaster for everyone. A friend of mine recommended a baby sling so that I could have my hands free to do other things and so I wouldn't feel resentful of all the time a baby takes up. The sling was our savior! I loved carrying him, and it allowed me to get other things done. The sling ended the pass-the-baby-around sport that so many parents have accepted as just the way things are. There is no way Jason would have stood for being bounced around from person to person for an entire day. An added benefit of the sling was that he was able to nurse anywhere and everywhere while in the sling. We went everywhere with him—weddings, funerals, dinners, grocery shopping, doctor's visits and vacations. Christmas shopping with Jason in the sling was a breeze. I can't imagine how mothers maneuver strollers through the narrow aisles in most stores. Everywhere we went people remarked how wonderful my baby was. I always pointed out that since my child felt right and was getting his needs met, he really had no reason to be upset."

SHUTDOWN SYNDROME

Throughout our 30 years of working with parents and babies, we have grown to appreciate the correlation between how well children thrive (emotionally and physically) and the style of parenting they receive.

"You're spoiling that baby!"

First-time parents Linda and Norm brought their four-month-old high-need baby, Heather, into my office for consultation because Heather had stopped growing. Heather had previously been a happy baby, thriving on a full dose of attachment parenting. She was carried many hours a day in a baby sling, her cries were given a prompt and nurturant response, she was breastfed on cue, and she was literally in physical touch with one of her parents most of the day. The whole family was thriving and this style of parenting was working for them. Well-meaning friends convinced these parents that they were spoiling their baby, that she was manipulating them, and that Heather would grow up to be a clingy, dependent child.

Parents lost trust

Like many first-time parents, Norm and Linda lost confidence in what they were doing and yielded to the peer pressure of adopting a more restrained and distant style of parenting. They let Heather cry herself to sleep, scheduled her feedings, and for fear of spoiling, they didn't carry her as much. Over the next two months Heather went from being happy and interactive to sad and withdrawn. Her weight leveled off, and she went from the top of the growth chart to the bottom. Heather was no longer thriving, and neither were her parents.

Baby lost trust

After two months of no growth, Heather was labeled by her doctor "failure to thrive" and was about to undergo an extensive medical workshop. When the parents consulted me, I diagnosed the shutdown syndrome. I explained that Heather had been thriving because of their responsive style of parenting. Because of their parenting, Heather had trusted that her needs would be met and her overall physiology had been organized. In thinking they were doing the best for their infant, these parents let themselves be persuaded into another style of parenting. They unknowingly pulled the attachment plug on Heather, and the connection that had caused her to thrive was gone. A sort of baby depression resulted, and her physiologic systems slowed down. I advised the parents to return to their previous high-touch, attachment style of parenting to carry her a lot, breastfeed her on cue, and respond sensitively to her cries by day and night. Within a month Heather was again thriving.

Babies thrive when nurtured

We believe every baby has a critical level of need for touch and nurturing in order to thrive. (Thriving means not just getting bigger, but growing to one's potential, physically and emotionally.) We believe that babies have the ability to teach their parents what level of parenting they need. It's up to the parents to listen, and it's up to professionals to support the parents' confidence and not undermine it by advising a more distant style of parenting, such as "let your baby cry it out" or "you've got to put him down more." Only the baby knows his or her level of need; and the parents are the ones that are best able to read their baby's language.

Babies who are "trained" not to express their needs may appear to be docile, compliant, or "good" babies. Yet these babies could be depressed babies who are shutting down the expression of their needs, and they may become children who don't ever speak up to get their needs met and eventually become the highest-need adults.