

## **BABYWEARING: A DAD'S EXPERIENCE**

By [Paulus Wanandi](#)

### **Introduction**

When I found out that my wife was pregnant a few months after our wedding, I was both overjoyed and terrified. I was really looking forward to being a father, but at the same time felt apprehensive about how much I could really contribute as the working parent. I knew that I had to do my fair share of parenting since we did not have any relatives nearby to help out. More importantly, I wanted to find a better way to bond with my baby from the beginning besides helping out with diaper changing and midnight feeding.

It wasn't until the third trimester of the pregnancy that I stumbled across the answer in "The Baby Book" by William and Martha Sears. Babywearing, as Sears called it, is something that was familiar to me growing up in Indonesia. There, babies are traditionally carried by their mothers (or other female caretakers) in a piece of cloth (called "selendang") for most of their first year and beyond. However, Sears contended that babywearing is also a great way for fathers to bond with their babies. Although I was not entirely convinced, I decided it wouldn't hurt to try. I bought my first baby carrier (a padded ring sling) from eBay, and a month later our son Samuel was born.

### **My first babywearing experience**

Typical for first-time parents, our first days with Samuel were challenging. He was the perfect little angel, as long as he was held close to our bodies. We barely slept the first night at the hospital, as he did not want to be put down at all. The next night, I volunteered to take care of the baby so my wife could get some sleep. After holding him for a few hours and having little luck putting him to sleep, I decided to try the sling. It took me a while to figure it out in my sleep-deprived state, but as soon as I got him settled in it properly, he instantly quieted down and fell asleep! I was amazed. I spent the rest of the night watching him sleep in peace attached to me, while my wife got her much-needed rest next to us. That night, I became a converted babywearer.

### **Babywearing promotes bonding**

As a first-time father, I was worried about feeling left out during the early months of Samuel's life due to the natural attachment between him and his mother. Babywearing helped me overcome that fear by allowing me to bond with him while caring for him at the same time. By wearing him any chance I had, I was able to soothe him during fussy times and put him to sleep without resorting to mommy's breasts. Watching him sleep while snuggled close to my body became my new favorite activity. Babywearing also enhanced my relationship with my wife, because she knew she could entrust me with the baby on my own. It helped me feel "empowered" as a dad.

### **Babywearing is Practical, Convenient and Safe**

Babywearing also made parenting much less daunting than we had originally feared. It freed our hands to do other things without having to leave Samuel in the hands of some inanimate object. It allowed us to do both housework and office work with him attached. It gave my wife the convenience of hands-free nursing, and it saved our arms during those "needy" times (sickness, separation anxiety, etc.) when he wanted to be carried for hours. In the first 6 months, the sling even became Samuel's daytime "crib", as he refused to nap alone in his real crib. However, this had the added advantage of us being able to take him anywhere and knowing that he will not have to miss his naps (and us suffering the consequence!) as long as we brought a sling along.

Although I was initially a bit hesitant about wearing Samuel outside, I finally decided that having a content baby is a lot more important than worrying about looking different. To my amusement, I received nothing but positive comments ("He looks really comfy in there", "I wish I had that when I had my baby", etc.) and adoring looks from strangers (mostly females, to my wife's chagrin) during my first babywearing outing.

Needless to say, we used the sling everywhere we went as we immediately realized that it was the most convenient option. We could eat in restaurants (no matter how small or crowded) and take public transportation without having to lug a heavy car seat or stroller. We could leave the house in a matter of seconds (just pop the baby in the sling and go) without worrying about strollers, extra blankets, etc. No flight of stairs or snow on the ground could slow us down. People often commented on how content and alert our son was; I believe it was because he could always observe the world around him at eye level while knowing that he's safely protected.

I also found babywearing to be much safer compared to the alternative (my arms). In addition to the protection that the carrier already provides, I still have the use of my free hands to further safeguard the baby when necessary (e.g., when bending down, etc.). Thanks to our carriers, we were able to safely involve the baby in our daily chores (cooking, cleaning, gardening, etc.) from an early age.

### **Choosing the Right Carriers for Your Needs**

While a growing number of baby carriers are now available in stores, my experience is that many of these carriers often sacrifice versatility and comfort in favor of looks, and they are usually quite expensive. One great thing about babywearing is that it does not need to be expensive at all. There are free directions available on the Web (see [TheBabyWearer.com](http://TheBabyWearer.com)) to make your own carriers. You can even improvise one in a pinch using a bed sheet, scarf, or an inexpensive piece of fabric without knowing how to sew (see [WearYourBaby.com](http://WearYourBaby.com) for ideas).

In my quest for the "perfect" baby carrier, I was surprised to find quite a remarkable variety of them. Most of them are made by stay-at-home moms and are available only on the Internet, and many are derivatives of other traditional carriers from around the world. In general, they fall into two main categories: those that are worn over one shoulder and those that can be worn over two shoulders.

#### ***One-Shoulder Carriers***

One-shoulder carriers are ideal for beginners as they are normally easier to use, faster to put on, and can accommodate more carrying positions than two-shoulder carriers. They are great for newborns and pre-crawling babies, and for hip-carrying older babies who are in the up-and-down stage.

One important feature to look for in one-shoulder carriers is wide fabric that can be spread across your shoulder (and preferably down to your upper arms), as it helps distribute the baby's weight. For dads who are new to babywearing and want something simple and sleek but functional, I recommend a **pouch**. These are extremely easy to use and there's nothing to adjust: just pop the baby in the position she/he likes and go. Some pouches are adjustable, making them suitable for sharing between different sized people. Others are fitted (non-adjustable) and are generally cheaper, but finding the right size could be tricky (contact the vendor for recommendation). Select a pouch with the appropriate fabric weight for your climate: some are made of fleece (which is comfortable and very popular but warm), while others are made of cotton or other light materials. Many pouches are available in a variety of colors and patterns including lots of neutrals. A good fit is key to a pouch's comfort, especially in non-adjustable ones. A good rule of thumb (for any carrier) is that the baby's bum should rest at or above your waist.

**Ring sling** is another type of one-shoulder carrier worth considering. They take a little more time to learn to use than pouches, but are also more adjustable (so easier to get a good fit and to share with other people) and more versatile than pouches. I found my ring slings to be indispensable during the first six months of Samuel's life. I prefer them to a Baby Björn style carrier because I found them more comfortable for long-term carrying, and because they allow us to carry Samuel in positions similar to our arms' (reclined or sitting supported, instead of dangling on the crotch). Ring slings are available in a wide variety of options: padded or unpadded (on shoulder and/or rails), different shoulder styles and fabrics, closed or open tail. Some manufacturers produce slings in fabrics specifically chosen to appeal to men.

In general, I prefer unpadded or lightly padded ring sling with a wide shoulder and an open tail. My first carrier was a heavily padded ring sling. While the rail padding was useful for extra head support when Samuel was a newborn, the heavy padding made it uncomfortable in a warm climate and made the sling less portable. A better alternative for newborns is one with lighter padding but soft fabric such as flannel. A closed/sewn tail usually makes a sling look more streamlined and easier to use; however, an open tail allows the rails to be independently adjusted for a proper fit, can be used for impromptu cover, and can be tucked in easily or wrapped around the ring. An open tail also allows a pocket to be added to the sling, which is a handy feature for storing small items. A good option for babywearing in warmer climates is a sling made from Solarveil® or cotton mesh fabric which provides sun protection and can be used in the pool or shower.

### ***Two-Shoulder Carriers***

Two-shoulder carriers are generally more comfortable for long-term use and heavier babies, and are more mainstream looking than one-shoulder carriers. The main advantage of two-shoulder carriers is that the baby's weight can be distributed to both shoulders and (in some carriers) also to the waist/hip area. This makes for a comfortable wearing experience.

The most common types of two-shoulder carriers are inspired by **Asian-style carriers** with a rectangular panel (where the baby sits) and four straps coming off the four corners (two for the shoulders and two for the waist). They normally work better for babies who can sit up well and have good upper body control (around 4-6 months), but some can also be used with a newborn with legs crossed (frogged) in front. For those who prefer the ease of buckles and straps, I recommend a **soft structured carrier**. It functions very similarly to a front/back pack. One thing to consider is when choosing a soft structured carrier is to make sure that it allows the baby to be in a more natural sitting position rather than dangling by the crotch area (which will put more pressure on the wearer's shoulders, among other things). I also prefer one that can be used as a back carrier. Those who like a simpler design without sacrificing functionality may prefer the more traditional **Mei Tai** carriers where the straps are tied on. Mei Tais are excellent front and back carriers, and can fit a wider range of people than the buckle-and-strap variety. Some men prefer the rugged look of framed backpacks, although they are typically much heavier, more cumbersome, less portable, and less versatile - not to mention more expensive - than the aforementioned soft front/back carriers.

### ***Wraparound Carriers***

Another carrier type that can be used over both shoulders is a **Wraparound carrier (or wrap)**, which is essentially just long, rectangular piece of fabric. Wraparounds are arguably the most versatile, comfortable, and durable of all baby carriers because they can be used in many different positions (including one-shoulder carries), are very adjustable, and most importantly, very comfortable to wear.

They do take longer to put on and to master than some other carriers, but are well worth the learning curve in my opinion. Due to their superior comfort, I prefer wraps to other carriers in times when I need to carry Samuel for an extended period. Stretchy wrap is arguably the most comfortable carrier for newborns and lighter infants up to 6 months old. Woven wraps are better

for heavier babies and for back carries because the fabric is more supportive than stretchy wrap. Woven wraps can be used from newborn all the way until the end of your babywearing days. They even have usefulness beyond babywearing, e.g. as a hammock, blanket, canopy, etc. As mentioned previously, you can also make your own wrap quite easily from a bed sheet or another long piece of fabric (see instructions at [Wearyourbaby.com](http://Wearyourbaby.com)), although a better quality fabric (especially those that are specially woven for carrying babies) will be more comfortable in the long run. I've made a nice stretchy wrap in minutes by simply cutting a piece of microfleece fabric to the desired length (no sewing needed).

## Summary

Here are the types of carriers that have worked best for us at different ages:

- **Newborn to pre-sitting infant (0-5 months):** ring sling, pouch, stretchy wrap, woven wrap, adjustable-bottom Asian-style carrier
- **Sitter/Crawler/Cruiser (5-12 months):** woven wrap, Mei Tai, and soft structured carrier for front and back carry; ring sling and pouch for hip carry
- **Mobile Toddler (1-2 years):** soft structured carrier, Mei Tai, and woven wrap for back and front carry; ring sling and pouch for quick, up-and-down hip carry
- **Older Toddler (2-3 years):** woven wrap and soft structured carrier for back carry

All in all, I have come to the realization that no one carrier will be perfect for all parents and all babies. As with clothing, many factors need to be taken into consideration when choosing the right carrier for you: your size and body type (and your partner's, if you want to share the carrier), the climate you live in, your personal taste, and the baby's age and temperament. Fortunately, there are so many wonderful (and mostly free) resources available on [TheBabyWearer.com](http://TheBabyWearer.com) and oftentimes locally (through babywearing organizations like [Baby Carriers Downunder](http://BabyCarriersDownunder) and [Babywearing International](http://BabywearingInternational), and natural parenting groups such as [La Leche League](http://LaLecheLeague) and [Attachment Parenting International](http://AttachmentParentingInternational)) that can help you at any stage during your babywearing process.

Our son Samuel never fitted that image of the "perfect" baby we often see in ads—the one who would lie contentedly in his crib and car seat by himself. In the first six months, he wanted to be held most of the time. While some people would classify this as high-needs behavior that should be rectified, I saw it as his way of communicating his needs to us, his means of survival. Babywearing enabled us to be responsive to his needs by keeping him happily and safely close to us while we went on with our daily lives. It also allowed me to forge a strong bond with my son from the very beginning. Most of all, it felt natural to me as parent, just like it has been for generations of parents around the world. While babywearing may not be for everyone, it has definitely been the right choice for us.

## About the Author

Paulus (aka [sling\\_dad](mailto:slingdad@gmail.com)) lives in Brisbane, Australia with his wife and two young sons, both of whom were worn since birth. He's found babywearing even more of a godsend with 2 boys under 5. He offers free, private babywearing consultation for Brisbane-area parents and runs monthly babywearing meetings locally (see Resources). He can be reached via email at [slingdad@gmail.com](mailto:slingdad@gmail.com).

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