

Description

Why Babywearing Matters

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Introduction



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Parenting is wonderful, interesting and joyful. It is also incredibly hard, monotonous, exhausting and often incredibly frustrating. Early parenthood can be especially tricky as expectation and reality collide, and tiredness and other challenges overwhelm. In this blog, independent midwife Debs Neiger outlines midwives' role as often the primary source of signposting, support and reassurance during this trying time for new parents.

Biological programming

As an independent midwife caring for families by providing continuity of care, a minimum of 6 weeks of frequent postnatal visits and forming close relationships with clients, I am hugely privileged to witness the transition into parenthood in all its glorious complexity, joy, frustration and exhaustion. It is rare that a family does NOT encounter any

struggles they might appreciate guidance and help with and that is ok. One thing I usually come back to my clients for in the early postnatal period is to signpost them to babywearing as a parenting tool.

Humans are carry mammals.[1] This means that our babies are born in a fairly helpless state, needing full physical support to ensure most of their needs are met. Biologically, humans are programmed to carry their babies and keep them close for nurturing and safety. Feeds are frequent and carrying is nearly constant. Primates caring for their young are a prime example of a fellow carry mammal. However, this is not what we generally do with our babies. Our babies are mostly expected to settle in prams, cots or Moses baskets. Bedsharing and sometimes even very frequent feeding is advised against and frowned upon, which means that our biological programming is at odds with what is normal in our society, and as we all know, a mismatch between reality and expectation is hard to navigate. When babies are hard to settle, want frequent feeding, need holding all the time and cry when missing physical contact, it is easy to assume this is because we are 'doing parenting wrong' and this often causes frustrations, loss of confidence and a sense of utter helplessness for new parents.

Voila, babywearing!

Carrying our babies, either in our arms or in slings is an excellent parenting tool that has the potential to ease multiple parenting struggles and promote attachment and nurturing behaviours. Slings just make carrying a lot easier on our bodies and leave us with our hands free to feed ourselves, care for other children, hold stuff, work, push a buggy and generally live life while caring for our very young.

So, what does the research suggest regarding babywearing?

Well, research regarding babywearing is fairly scant, but there are some findings that are meaningful. There are benefits to babies and parents, but of course, the benefits to babies are also ultimately benefits for parents and vice versa.

Babywearing seems to:

*Promote attachment, bonding and nurturing behaviours[1,2,3]

*Lessen crying in infants[4]

*Aid normal physical development

*Reduce severe symptoms of reflux and associated health conditions such as otitis media[5]

*Help parents nurture their infants, especially when struggling with postnatal depression[6]

*Increases breastfeeding continuation[7]

*Supports baby-parent reconnection after periods of separation or after a fraught day in general

Additionally, a good sling makes carrying an unsettled baby a lot easier on parents' shoulders, back and pelvis than simply carrying them in their arms. Parents also expend a lot less energy when using a carrying aid, and we all know that new parents do well to preserve as much energy as possible. Learning to use a sling is also wonderful to increase parenting confidence in general as any newly learned skill tends to do.

How does this apply to midwifery practice?

As a midwife I came to carrying babies when I had my own little ones. Early parenthood was more challenging that I had imagined (see, that mismatch between expectation and reality again!). My babies did not sleep without physical contact, certainly not in the day, which made life very tricky indeed before I discovered slings. Once slings had entered our life, things became a lot easier, and for my second child we didn't even own a pushchair. My husband in particular found connecting with our babies in the sling incredibly helpful. Even though we very much were a team when it came to parenting, he had never really interacted with a baby before becoming a father himself. He wished he had a similar physical bond with them, like I did during breastfeeding, so carrying our babies really made him feel a lot more bonded to them and also increased his confidence as a parent.

I really wanted to incorporate my skills around babywearing into my midwifery practice, so I invested in several comprehensive babywearing consultation courses so I could be confident in passing on my skills and I have offered to do a sling demo for most clients since. Often leading to quite the revelation about how different parenting can be when your hands are free! There are also less comprehensive courses designed to teach parents how to carry their babies in stretchy slings for example. Some NHS trusts teach this skill, particularly to parents who have their babies earlier than expected, to help with Kangaroo care. It is of course very important to teach awareness of safety considerations regarding sling use, my top tips are the wonderful TICKS guidelines that can be found on the Baby Sling Safety website.[8]

However, not every midwife will have the funds, inclination, time or scope of practice to go on special courses to gain babywearing skills, and that is of course absolutely fine.

It is still very possible to signpost parents towards babywearing in general: there are local sling libraries (places where you can try a variety of slings with individualised information as to what might be the most appropriate sling for a family, usually staffed by volunteer peer supporters), babywearing safety rules and perhaps local babywearing consultants, so families can still reap the benefits of an excellent sling as a parenting tool.

It is also helpful to be at least vaguely aware of the basics of sling safety as most midwives, and certainly those working in the community, will see babies in slings on occasion. Quickly being able to spot issues with the safety of a chosen sling or with the positioning of the baby within the sling may be a literal lifesaver for some babies.

We as midwives are wonderfully placed to promote slings as part of giving supportive and encouraging midwifery care. Any intervention with potential benefits such as babywearing is something families deserve to be signposted to, especially in the context of improved attachment, reduced crying, better mental health and continued breastfeeding and their impact on general public health.

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