

Babywearing:

A guide



NCT antenatal teacher and babywearing consultant Sophie Messenger provides a guide to using slings to carry babies.

NCT practitioners sometimes get asked by parents for guidance on using slings. This article looks at the different kinds of slings available, and the advantages of each. It explains how to carry a baby in a way that respects the baby's anatomy, and offers guidance on what to look for when buying a sling.

Babywearing is practical. Parents have their hands free when using a sling. They can get on with household tasks, make themselves a snack or a meal, play with older siblings and socialise, while caring for their baby at the same time. It can be easier to get around in places like town centres and shops, or go for a walk in the countryside. There is no need to lug around a heavy car seat, or battle getting a pushchair into the car, or onto a bus or up stairs. It can also delay the expense of a pram until new parents know what they need.

The amount of peer-reviewed research in English on the benefits of sling-wearing is limited. Glover's overview of research in 2012 cautiously concluded that, 'The evidence for a positive effect of sling use on attachment is suggestive, but a lack of replication of the results prevents firm conclusions being drawn.'¹

How to carry a baby comfortably and ergonomically

At birth, a baby's spine and hips are still immature. The spine is naturally rounded, in a c-shape, and not designed to be straight. The spine and the hip joints are still cartilaginous, and therefore fairly soft and flexible.² A good sling has the following characteristics:

To support and protect a baby's developing spine and hips, it is important that the carrier is able to support the baby's back, hips and back of the head.

To support the back, the carrier needs to allow the baby's back to remain in its

natural rounded position, and the fabric should be snug enough so that the baby doesn't slump in a slouched position, especially when asleep (see more about this in the section on safety below).

To support the hips, the carrier should allow the baby to assume a position known as spread squat, or M position, where the baby's bottom sits lower than his or her knees, and the fabric should support the baby's legs from knee pit to knee pit. This allows for the balls of the hips to sit adequately in their sockets.³

The fabric should be high and snug enough to support the back of the baby's head (it should also be adjustable so it comes no higher than this). This is especially important in newborn babies.

Babywearing instructors do not recommend carrying a baby facing out in a sling, as it forces the baby's back straight against the wearer's chest, and does not allow the baby to assume the spread squat position (it causes the legs to dangle in a harness like position).

Finally, for the comfort of the parent wearing the baby, it is important that the carrier is high and tight on the parent's body, to avoid causing back strain and displacing the wearer's centre of gravity. As a rule of thumb, the baby should be placed close enough for the wearer to be able to kiss the baby's head.

Front-pack baby carriers

Unfortunately, few of the major carrier brands sold on the high street meet the ergonomic criteria highlighted above. These carriers put a baby in a dangling position, much like sitting in a harness, with all of the baby's weight resting on his crotch rather than being spread from his bottom and thighs. The baby's back is also forced into a straight position.³ This type of sling also places the baby too low, with the baby's head at mid-chest level. The design of this type of carrier and the low position of the baby are not ergonomic for the carrying adult either, and carrying a heavy baby can quickly become uncomfortable.

Different types of slings

There is a plethora of baby carriers available. The range of baby carriers



The carrier should allow the baby to assume the M position

available in the UK fall into four categories: wraps, mei tais, soft structured carriers, and ring slings and pouches.

Wraps

Wraps, which come in both stretchy and woven varieties, are long pieces of cloth that are tied around the baby and parent. Stretchy wraps are made of a soft, stretchy t-shirt-like material. One of their advantages is that they can be left tied on. Due to the nature of the fabric, most parents find that stretchy wraps are not supportive enough for babies aged six months or more.

A stretchy wrap needs to be used with several layers around the baby to ensure adequate support, which can make wearing it uncomfortable in hot weather.

Woven wraps are diagonally woven cloths, which give the fabric the ideal amount of stretch and support. They are the most versatile form of carrier available, as they automatically adjust to the size of the carried child. They can be used from birth to toddlerhood and beyond, and can be worn on the front, hip and back and tied in many different ways. It is, however, more complicated to master tying a woven wrap than a more structured carrier.

Mei tais

Mei tais are Asian-style carriers consisting of a shaped piece of fabric (usually a square or a rectangle) with four straps. One set of straps is tied around the wearer's waist and the other around the wearer's shoulders, the fabric forming a pocket for the baby. They are easy to use and can be worn on the front, hip and back. As the weight is spread on both shoulders and hips through the straps, they are comfortable to use with older babies and toddlers. The size of the rectangle of fabric determines the age range each mei tai is suitable for: smaller babies, toddlers or preschoolers.

Soft structured carriers

Soft structured carriers are a hybrid between a mei tai and a rucksack: the body is similar to a mei tai but this type of carrier has structured waist and padded shoulder straps which can fasten with buckles or straps. They are very easy and comfortable to use. The advantage of the buckles is that the shorter straps do not trail on the floor, which can be useful in winter/wet weather.

Ring slings and pouches

Ring slings are pieces of cloth with two rings sewn at one end. The free end is looped through the rings, forming a pouch for the baby, with the tail of the fabric hanging down. They are worn over one



The NCT Caboo carrier allows to keep your baby close enough to kiss



Mei tais are comfortable to use with older babies and toddlers



Stretchy wraps can be left tied on

shoulder. They are very quick to put on but require rigorous learning to get the adjustment right. The rings offer more adjustability than a pouch. Unpadded ring slings are easier to adjust, and the ones made out of woven wrap material are the comfiest to use.

Pouches are also worn over one shoulder. They are made of one folded length of material that forms a pocket for the baby

and is worn over the body like a sash. Unless they are adjustable, they need to be sized for the wearer so the same pouch cannot be used with two parents of very different sizes.

A note about fitting

Slings are very much like jeans or shoes – one style does not fit all. Different body shapes and sizes means that one person's dream sling might be the next person's nightmare one. It is always preferable to try before you buy.



The soft structured carrier has a structured waist and padded shoulder straps that can fasten with buckles or straps

sling or carrier should not close around them so you have to open it to check on them. In a cradle position your baby should face upwards not be turned in towards your body.

Close enough to kiss

Your baby's head should be as close to your chin as is comfortable. By tipping your head forward you should be able to kiss your baby on the head or forehead.

Keep chin off the chest. A baby should never be curled so their chin is forced onto their chest as this can restrict their breathing. Ensure there is always a space of at least a finger width under your baby's chin.

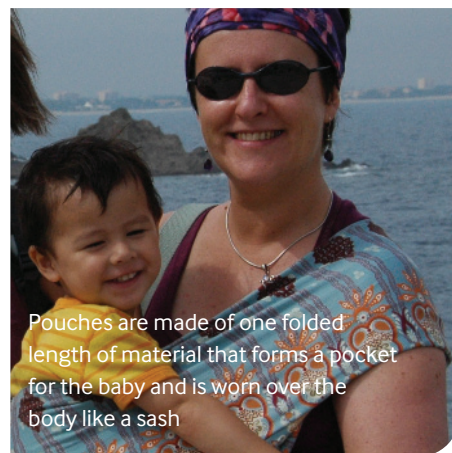
Supported back

In an upright carrier, a baby should be held comfortably close to the wearer so their back is supported in its natural position and their tummy and chest are against you. If a sling is too loose, they can slump, which can partially close their airway. (You can test this by placing a hand on your baby's back and pressing gently – they should not uncurl or move closer to you.)

A baby in a cradle carry in a pouch or ring sling should be positioned carefully with their bottom in the deepest part so the sling does not fold them in half pressing their chin to their chest. These guidelines are downloadable as a PDF from www.naturalmamas.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/TICKS2.pdf



Ring slings are very quick to put on



Pouches are made of one folded length of material that forms a pocket for the baby and is worn over the body like a sash

Babywearing instructors usually recommend that the safest position for a baby to be carried is in an upright position. Lying down cradle-type positions are best avoided with newborns, as it is quite difficult to ensure the position is safe with no chin-to-chest posture. Upright positions are also more suitable for the baby's developing hips and spine.

Avoid bag style slings

Bag slings are unsafe for small babies as they put babies in a dangerous position (chin-to-chest) and cover their faces with fabric, creating an asphyxiation risk. The Infantino brand was recalled in 2010 due to deaths in the US, but similar shaped brands are still sold in the UK. For more info see www.babyslingsafety.blogspot.com.

Breastfeeding in a sling

Many mothers ask whether it is possible to breastfeed in a sling, especially second-time mothers who want to look after their older child while nursing their new baby. It is possible to breastfeed in a sling, but one hand is needed to support the baby's neck. However it can take weight away

Sling safety

The British Association of Babywearing Instructors (<http://babi.me.uk/>) offers guidelines, known as TICKS.

For safe babywearing, use the checklist:

- Tight
- In view at all times
- Close enough to kiss
- Keep chin off the chest
- Supported back

Tight

Slings and carriers should be tight enough to hug your baby close as this will be most comfortable for you both. Any slack/loose fabric will allow your baby to slump down in the carrier, which can hinder their breathing and pull on your back.

In view at all times

You should always be able to see your baby's face by simply glancing down. The fabric of a

from a mother's arms. Breastfeeding is a skill, and so is babywearing, so it is important to master both skills separately before attempting to breastfeed in a sling. If breastfeeding in a sling, be particularly aware of the risk of positional asphyxia at all times: avoid the chin-to-chest position and make sure that the baby's face is not pushed into the breast. It is probably safer and easier to wait until the baby is a few weeks old and can hold his head. (To watch videos of how to breastfeed in a sling see <http://thefunnyslippedwoman.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/milk-to-go-breastfeeding-in-sling.html>)

Learning to use slings

There are three options for practitioners and parents who want to learn how to use a sling: they can teach themselves, attend a sling meet or a sling library, or have a consultation with a qualified sling consultant⁴ If parents prefer to teach themselves, there are some useful online photo tutorials (www.theslingschool.com/p/instructions.html) and video tutorials (www.slingababy.co.uk/#!videos/c16jz) on the internet. Slingmeets are informal sling drop-in sessions run by volunteers. They are free to attend. A list of all local slingmeets is available at www.slingmeet.co.uk. Many NCT branches also have slingmeets.

Sling libraries are drop-in sling lending sessions run by volunteers. A fee and deposit are required to hire a sling. The list of UK sling libraries can be found at <http://ukslinglibraries.wordpress.com>. Some NCT branches have sling libraries where you can try slings on, and NCT is working to arrange insurance so that the libraries can make loans.

A consultation with a qualified consultant can be held at the parent's or the consultant's home and usually lasts a couple of hours. Before the consultation, the consultant will assess the parents' needs over the phone or by email and bring a selection of appropriate slings for the parents to try. A list of UK babywearing consultants is available at the British Association of Babywearing Instructors (<http://babi.me.uk/find-a-babywearing-instructor-near-you>) and on the Babywearing UK website (www.babywearing.co.uk/localsupport/#map_top).

As a practitioner, you may also decide to train as a babywearing consultant. Courses are available from four different babywearing schools in the UK: Trageschule UK (www.trageschule.co.uk), The School of Babywearing (www.schoolofbabywearing.com), Slingababy (www.slingababy.co.uk), and JPMBB (<http://jeporitemonbebe.com>).



Woven wraps are the most versatile form of carrier available

Where to buy slings

Few high street retailers stock slings that meet the ergonomic criteria highlighted above. There are however, many online stores selling carriers. The NCT shop (www.nctshop.co.uk/Baby-Slings-Carriers/products/214/) stocks an excellent range and has partnered with Close Parent to produce its own entry level sling, Caboo NCT. There are also several small businesses, listed on the sling guide website www.slingguide.co.uk/sling-resources. Beware of Ebay and non-approved online retailers, as there are many fake poor quality copies of well-known brands such as Ergo, Freehand and Moby circulating on the internet. You can also buy slings at NCT Nearly New Sales.

To find out more

The Sling Guide site (www.slingguide.co.uk) is a useful resource for parents.

References

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