

Babywearing: Parenting with a Gentle Touch

by ABM breastfeeding counsellors Ilana King and Emma Pickett

The following article was first presented at this year's ABM conference in Leicester (see page 22 for conference reports and photographs). The presentation was so well received by all who attended that we have decided to reproduce Ilana and Emma's words here in full....

Ilana King:

So what evidence is there to back up the babywearing method of parenting and how is it relevant to breastfeeding? Humans are mammals. Mammals parent their young in one of four ways (as described by Dr Bergman in South Africa, an expert in animal behaviour): cache mammals whose mothers hide their young in a safe place and return to them every twelve hours; follow mammals whose young follow their mothers wherever they go; nest mammals whose young stay in the nest with the mother returning to them several times a day; and carry mammals whose young are very immature at birth and are carried constantly and fed around the clock. The composition of the milk produced by a mammal gives a clear indication of which of these categories the mammal belongs to. Milk high in protein and fat is produced by mammals that leave their young, while milk lower in protein and fat is produced by those that carry their young and need to feed them at frequent intervals. Consider the rabbit – a cache animal. Their milk is 18.3% fat compared with human milk which is 3.8% fat. Rabbit milk is 13.9% protein while human milk is 1% protein.¹ In light of this data, it is easy to see that human babies - who need to be fed frequently - were never meant to be far from their mothers.

More evidence for carrying babies can be found in the suggestion that humans complete their gestational period outside the womb. Many scientists think that babies are born 'prematurely' to allow their heads to pass through the birth canal before they get too large. Anthropologists have discovered that human brains have become progressively bigger over the last 2 million years, but that the human pelvis could not get larger than it currently is whilst still allowing us to remain upright. Therefore, human babies are born more underdeveloped and helpless than other primate species. Human babies compensate by quadrupling their brain size after birth. In fact, the first three months after birth are a period of rapid growth sometimes referred to as the "fourth trimester".² For a human baby to emerge from the womb at the developmental level of a newborn elephant, for example, it would need to have a



head the size of a one year old – a physical impossibility.

Dr Sears has said "It's easier to understand babywearing when you think of a baby's gestation as lasting 18 months – 9 months inside the womb and at least 9 months outside."³ If you follow this logic, then the first 9 months of a human babies' life is really finishing normal gestation, and optimum human development should take place in an environment with as many elements of the uterine environment as possible. It has been shown that babies kept skin-to-skin with their mothers show better oxygenation, better temperature control and a reduction of the stress hormones which ultimately slow growth. This constant skin-to-skin environment most closely mimics uterine environment for the transition to life outside the womb.

For premature babies, the need for skin-to-skin contact is even more critical. Kangaroo Mother Care, which started in the 1980's in areas of poor resources and few incubators, is a good example of the importance of contact. Mothers and babies are wrapped together skin-to-skin 24 hours a day, regardless of oxygen tubes and IVs. Data is clear that preemies grow faster, breastfeed earlier, have fewer breathing interruptions, handle pain with less stress, sleep better and go home from the hospital sooner when Kangaroo Care is used. If carrying

has so many extreme positive effects on a premature baby, why would it not have the same benefits for full term babies? A full term baby has the same need for closeness and benefits in the same way from the calming effect of being carried.

So why is all this important for breastfeeding? Research shows that the amount a baby is carried has a direct impact on frequency and continuation of breastfeeding. A study comparing the parenting of three groups with substantially different approaches to infant care had interesting results. The participants were breastfeeding mothers of infants who filled out questionnaires about their feeding and sleeping patterns at 10 days, 5 weeks and 12 weeks of age. The parents were all from London and Copenhagen, and a third group was identified from within those two areas consisting of parents who planned to use proximal care. (Proximal care is defined as holding infants for more than 80% of the time between 8am and 8pm, frequent breastfeeding and rapid response to infant cries.) The results clearly showed that proximal care parents fed their infants more often than both other groups, and persisted with breastfeeding for longer. Why does carrying impact on breastfeeding like this? Because having a baby close to its mother all the time means she will pick up and respond to hunger cues much earlier.

However, it goes beyond this. Having a baby close to its mother also helps to stimulate oxytocin. Dr Sears says, "Hormones have a biological measure of activity called a half life – meaning the time required for one-half of the substance to be used up in the bloodstream. Some substances have a long half life, others have a short one. Mothering hormones have a very short half life – approximately 20 minutes. This means that in order for a mother to maintain a consistently high level, these hormones need to be stimulated around every 20 minutes. Babywearing causes this to happen. The continued presence, the frequency of feeding and touching, keeps mothers hormones high."

Crying plays a big part too. Many parents interpret crying as a feeding problem - an indication of hunger. In clinical practice, complaints of excessive infant crying are often dealt with by changing feeding practices: changing formula milk brand; discontinuing breastfeeding or introducing top-ups; or the early introduction of solids. Research shows that when crying peaks in infants, babies that are carried cry 43% less than other babies. By reducing the amount of time a baby cries, parents feel less need to question their feeding practices and are more likely to continue with breastfeeding.

Reducing crying plays another role. There is

evidence to show that prolonged crying can have a negative effect on infant growth. So much energy goes into crying and self soothing that less energy is available for growth. Studies of both full term infants in orphanages and pre-term babies in hospitals have shown a positive correlation between how often a baby is touched and how quickly a baby grows. Dr Sears states, "if left to his own resources without the frequent presence of the mother, the infant may develop disorganised patterns of behaviour: colic, fussy cries, jerky movements, disorganised self rocking behaviours, anxious thumb sucking, irregular breathing and disturbed sleep. The infant who is forced to self regulate before his time spends a lot of energy self stimulating, wasting valuable energy he could have used to grow and develop."

We have talked about the positive benefits of babywearing for the infant and its effect on breastfeeding, but there are also positive effects for the mother. Mothers whose babies cry less show more confidence in their parenting. Mothers who babywear feel freer to do other things and go out more. These mothers feel less stress!



And let's not forget dads. Many fathers report that wearing their baby in a sling helps them develop a sense of closeness that using a pushchair doesn't. Why is this increased bonding in dads important to breastfeeding? Well, one of the main reasons cited by mothers for expressing milk and giving bottles in those

early days, is that partners can then help with feeding and thereby bond with their baby. If fathers babywear, they will feel that sense of closeness without potentially disrupting the breastfeeding relationship between mother and baby just as it is getting established. Many babywearing fathers also report feeling empowered, through being able to soothe their babies without lactating!

Emma Pickett:

Some of you may have been confident babywearers for a long time: certainly many years before the idea first popped into my head. Others of you may feel neutral about the idea. You may think: "No problem - however people want to carry their babies is fine with me. I'm supportive of



different parenting styles.” And perhaps one or two of you are thinking, “Oh here we go - the hippies and their slings. They’re an inevitable part of the breastfeeding community. Bless them and their Guatemalan fabrics - they mean well. A Baby Bjorn looks like an invitation to nothing but shoulder and back ache to me though and I’m perfectly happy with my McLaren, thank you very much.”

I am going to play devil’s advocate here and say that as supporters of breastfeeding we need to understand the profound and intimate connection it has with babywearing. It is not the *babywearers* who should justify themselves but those found in modern industrial societies who place a baby’s ‘independence’ and ‘self-reliance’ over natural evolutionary instincts. Breastfeeding is part of normal natural parenting and it’s not too much of a stretch to say that babywearing is too. As Meredith Small says in her book *Our Babies Ourselves*;⁴ “During 99% of human history the pattern of infant eating, sleeping and contact was thus – human infants were carried all the time, probably slept with their mothers and fed frequently throughout the day.”

A society losing touch with the concept of mother/child physical closeness will find that losing touch with breastfeeding is not far behind. As breastfeeding rates climb, front-carriers start to become more commonplace and the Guatemalan fabrics come out again!

Promoting babywearing and discussing it as a biological norm can make other mothers who choose not to babywear feel uncomfortable or guilty. This group makes statements like:

- It wasn’t right for my family
- Not all babies are the same
- I didn’t do it with my baby and she was perfectly happy and healthy
- My friend did it with her baby and she was so attached she could never put her down
- Perhaps it was the best thing for my baby but I don’t think it was for me and of course – a happy mother means a happy baby
- I tried it but I could never get comfortable. I tried to find someone to show me how to do it properly but I could never get the hang of it so I gave up

Do any of those arguments sound familiar to those of us working in the frontline of breastfeeding support?

Just as we tip-toe the line between promoting breastfeeding and NOT making those who choose to formula feed feel guilty, there is evidence impossible to ignore with babywearing too. Whether or not we make past or present mothers feel uncomfortable cannot be our driving force.

Our society – that is Western industrialized society – is an unusual one. As Gabrielle Palmer writes in *The Politics of Breastfeeding*⁵ “Western culture seems to have a drive to separate mothers and babies. The goal of independence starts at birth and mothers who want to stay with their infants most of the time are viewed as ‘possessive’ or ‘eccentric’.”

In a society where babywearing is rare, breastfeeding rates are lower. Why? Going by the factors Ilana has already mentioned, we can assume babywearing makes breastfeeding easier, more effective, more likely to continue. Perhaps there are also reasons deeply seated in our culture. The society that wants a baby to be self-reliant as soon as possible, self-soothe and sleep independently, creates adults who, as parents, have less inclination to babywear or embrace breastfeeding. Sounds extreme, doesn’t it? But anthropologists have noticed an undeniable pattern.

Dr James Prescott has made a career out of identifying the origins of violence and social alienation. In a series of studies for the American National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, he found that he could predict with an 80% accuracy the peaceful or homicidal violent nature of 49 tribal cultures from a single measure – was the baby carried for the majority of the day for the first year of life?

Jean Liedloff in *The Continuum Concept*⁶ places a high emphasis on this 'In Arms Phase' and argues that if this phase is missed, the child lacks a fundamental piece of their confidence and emotional development. She says; "normal deprivations are now so tangled in the meshes of our cultures that they are almost unremarked except at such extremes as manifest themselves in cost and danger to the rest of us (through violence, insanity and crime for example)."

When we trust baby and trust our maternal instincts to hold and respond to cues, breastfeeding is more likely to succeed and humans fit their evolutionary expectations

In a society which prizes mother/baby separation, the promotion of breastfeeding is an inevitable struggle. We may blame the 20th century baby gurus for instilling us with the strong sense that sleeping through the night, longer feeding intervals and baby self-soothing are the ultimate goals but in the 21st century the core values appear to be the same. For Gina Ford and Tracy Hogg, the main aim for parents is assumed to be independently sleeping babies with appropriately spaced intervals between feeds. In *Secrets of the Babywhisperer*, we are told that on the fourth day a baby should start their EASY routine – feeding "every 2-and-a-half to 3 hours". When Hogg discusses babywearing she says, "Parents often don't know when the comforting ends and the bad habits



begin. They continue to hold the baby way past meeting his need...Instead of holding him endlessly, pick him up when he starts to cry but put him down as soon as he is calm...You might have to pick that baby up twenty or thirty times or more".

It seems that for many baby gurus - and sadly for some health professionals in the community too - the baby is not to be trusted. Rather than being seen as a sophisticated product of evolution, the baby is attempting to manipulate us. When a baby wants to be constantly held 'something is wrong'. Mothers can create 'rods for their own back' with constant attention.

When we trust baby and trust our maternal instincts to hold and respond to cues, breastfeeding is more likely to succeed and humans fit their evolutionary expectations. Unless we face up to the juxtaposition between our society's desire to increase breastfeeding rates while simultaneously valuing the separation of mother and baby, what will the future be? Will breastfeeding rates simply plateau? As breastfeeding advocates, we know it's not just about nutrition - white blood cells, enzymes and lower rates of diabetes - it's about nurturing and emotional health too. As Gabrielle Palmer says, 'it's not just the milk that counts'.

I would suggest that, on the 30th anniversary of the ABM, we acknowledge that babywearing/baby holding/mother-child closeness is an important part of our remit. Our logo suggests it always has been. When we speak to a mother struggling to 'put a newborn down' and pushing against her maternal instincts, or guiltily confessing she let her baby sleep in her arms, let's not assume she has chosen her parenting style or was even consciously aware she had options.

In the future a decent sling may be seen as important to a baby's overall health as a car seat. Future generations may look back on our sluggishness to babywear as I look back on my parents' generation of the 1970s who didn't breastfeed in their millions and commented 'they didn't even realize it was important'. ●

References:

- 1 *Nutrients and Calories in Breastmilk*; Gwen Dewar; 2008
- 2 *Birth: a History*; Tina Cassidy; Chatto and Windus; 2007
- 3 *The Baby Book*; Sears and Sears; Harper Thorsons; 2005
- 4 *Our Babies Ourselves*; Meredith Small; Doubleday; 1999
- 5 *The Politics of Breastfeeding*; Gabrielle Palmer; Pinter and Martin; 2009
- 6 *The Continuum Concept*; Jean Liedloff; Penguin; 2004

With thanks to Claire Elcock, Hazel Phillips, Sian Hampson and Clare Hesketh for their photographs