

Getting Carried Away

Babywearing and its advocates are finding a place in the mainstream.
By Bahar Takhtehchian



Psny

For centuries, mothers around the world have carried their babies in cloth slings and wraps or on their hips and backs as a means of protecting the child and keeping their hands free for work. Until the last decade, “babywearing,” the act of carrying baby close to the caretaker’s body, had been slow to gain ground in industrialized, gear-oriented countries like the United States. Now, experts believe new philosophies such as “attachment parenting”—which teaches parents to build strong bonds with their children in order to ensure emotional stability and trust—as well as an increased interest in more healthful, organic living, are causing many to embrace old-fashioned methods of child care.

Keeping Baby Close

“Babywearing is an ancient art. It’s not something that is new and trendy. It’s a revival of us feeling closer to our primal roots,” said Dena Smith Givens, a leader of La Leche League, an international organization dedicated to providing breastfeeding education.

She noted that the rising popularity of breast- versus bottle-feeding may be contributing to the popularity of babywearing, since it instills a special bond between mother and child—a bond that many mothers extend by wearing their baby. To that end, many slings and wraps on the market accommodate breast-feeders’ needs by providing extra-long “tails” that allow mothers to feed their child discreetly.

“I think demographically you see that breastfeeding moms probably wear their children more than their bottle-feeding counterparts,” said Smith Givens. “Breastfeeding moms tend to be in tune with their baby’s needs because they’re close to the baby and it’s almost like the breast is an extension of the womb.”

Natasha Stanton, co-founder of Rockin’ Baby Slings, said many of her customers are increasingly interested in getting in touch with methods



Rockin’
Baby
Sling



Portamee

Heavenly Bundle

of natural living—which can include everything from buying organic foods to using reusable cloth diapers and transporting their babies in slings instead of strollers.

“I think originally it was the hippie parents who would use slings and wraps as a way to be natural, and now it’s moved beyond that to people who are health-conscious and are reading up on the best, most natural ways to be with baby,” Stanton said.

Others, like Joanna Butenko of Heavenly Bundle slings, pointed out that babywearing celebrities like Gwen Stefani and Jennifer Garner help make slings, wraps and pouches trendy. “Celebrities are everywhere and you have a lot of famous moms who are wearing their babies. People see that, and slings start to catch on,” Butenko said.

Robin Stein is co-founder of the Portamee, a company that offers hip carriers that accommodate kids up to 35 pounds. Stein believes the market for baby gear is especially hot right now thanks to the success of status products such as Petunia Pickle Bottom diaper bags and Bugaboo strollers.

“I think there’s been a change in the market in the last five to seven years,” Stein said. “The baby market had been predominantly staid and tired. Now we’re in a baby and luxury market boom and that particular customer is very style-conscious and much more demanding about having functional equipment.”

Like strollers and diaper bags, the sky is the limit for sling prices. Maya Omori, the U.S. manager of Psny, makers of the cloth P-sling, said the company’s premium slings are made from cotton and linen and can cost anywhere from \$99 to \$550.

Who’s Babywearing?

Slings, wraps, pouches and hip carriers come in a variety of styles and colors fitting for everyone from suburban soccer moms to hipster city dads.

“In the past year, I’ve seen a major surge in dads coming to our store,” Stanton explained. “They love the colors—the browns and blacks with studded trim—and they’re often pickier than some of the women!”

Rockin’ Baby Slings has always been com-

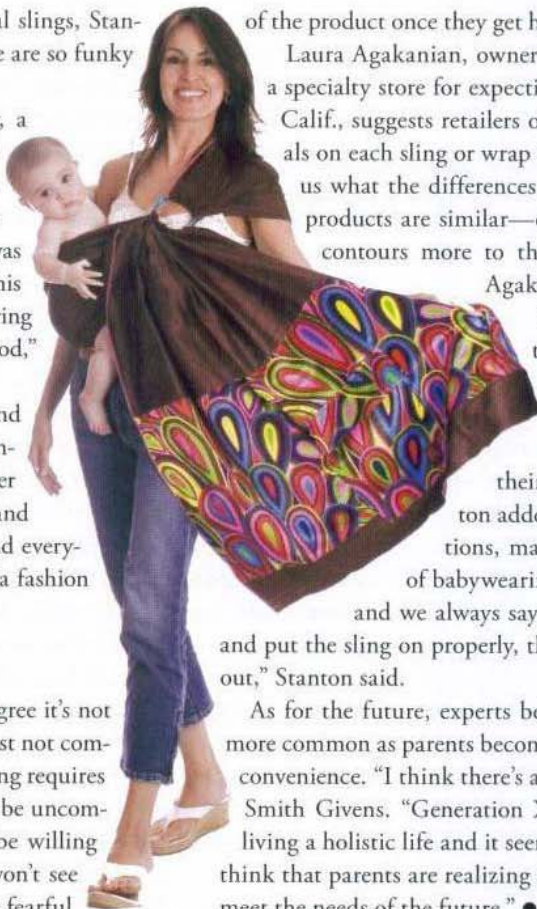
mitted to providing fashionable and functional slings, Stanton said, and a few pieces from her product line are so funky they're viewed as accessories.

Amy Glovsky Abreu, owner of Oopa Baby, a high-end silk, cashmere, chambray and pique ring sling company, said her own struggle to find fashionable ring slings inspired her to enter the business three years ago. "I figured that if I was walking around with stained clothes and all of this extra baby weight, I at least wanted to be wearing something that would make me look and feel good," she said.

Omori of Psnny said the company's high-end slings evoke a feeling of luxury and make a fashion statement. "For us, it's not just one sling per mother. Many moms have a number of slings and sometimes the whole family comes together and everyone picks their own sling because it's more of a fashion piece," Omori said.

Learning the Ropes

Despite the benefits of babywearing, experts agree it's not for everyone, explaining that some moms are just not comfortable with the level of attachment babywearing requires and that others may simply find the process to be uncomfortable or inconvenient. While parents may be willing to purchase several slings per baby, retailers won't see return customers if parents get frustrated or are fearful



Oopa Baby

of the product once they get home.

Laura Agakanian, owner of Bellies, Babies and Bosoms, a specialty store for expecting and new moms in Glendale, Calif., suggests retailers offer customers hands-on tutorials on each sling or wrap style they carry. "Customers ask us what the differences are between the brands. Many products are similar—one is just more adjustable, one contours more to the body, one is more upright," Agakanian said.

Being able to show your customers how the product works is essential to making the sale.

The more comfortable they are with the sling, the better their experience will be. Still, Stanton added they may have plenty of questions, many of which concern the safety of babywearing. "People always ask if it's safe and we always say that if you look at the manual and put the sling on properly, there's no way your baby can fall out," Stanton said.

As for the future, experts believe babywearing will become more common as parents become more aware of its benefits and convenience. "I think there's a whole shift in our society," said Smith Givens. "Generation X seems to feel more drawn to living a holistic life and it seems like green is the new black. I think that parents are realizing that we have the opportunity to meet the needs of the future." ●

BECOME A BABYWEARING EXPERT

For the uninitiated, your store may be the first resource a new mom has for learning the ins and outs of the current babywearing trend. Make sure that your sales associates are able to answer common questions about the benefits and possible hazards involved with using slings, wraps and pouches.

Q. Can babywearing enhance the bond between me and the baby?

Advocates of babywearing say slings, wraps, pouches and hip carriers create an "outer womb," offering a physical closeness that is believed to make babies more calm and less likely to cry.

"Neurologically, the baby is used to being close to the mother's heart and being warm," said Dr. Jeanne Ohm, a chiropractor and executive director of the International Chiropractic Pediatric Association.

Q. How does carrying my baby in a sling or pouch benefit him?

Ohm noted that since the inception of the "Back to Sleep" program, which urges parents to make sure their baby sleeps on its back to reduce the incidence of SIDS, many babies spend too much time on their backs, which can lead to the flattening of the back of the head.

"If you flatten the skull, that's going to get in the way of neurological development as well," Ohm said.

From a developmental standpoint, babywearing can help stimulate communication and motor skills and auditory and visual alertness.

Q. Is one type of carrier better than others?

A baby in a sling, wrap or pouch is more likely than those in strollers and car seat carriers to adjust and move her head, neck and legs as the mother moves, resulting in crucial muscle development, Ohm said.

To that end, Ohm recommends moms switch between types of carriers and encourages them to alternate the side they carry the baby on so that neither the mother nor baby suffers an imbalance of postural movement or body strain.

"If you keep a baby in a sling all the time, that's going to impair the child's postural development, which will then affect him neurologically," Ohm explained. "They need to be moved from side to side and in a variety of carriers."

Q. Are there risks associated with babywearing?

New mothers, who often have the hormone relaxin in their bodies even months after giving birth, must be extra careful not to put too much strain on their bodies.

"Relaxin in the joints makes new mothers susceptible to the negative effects of hypermobility and to the potential for injury, so by not switching sides, she's impairing postural development for herself and her child," Ohm said.