

# Wrapped in the hormone of love

BY JENNY CARLETON

*Choosing to carry your baby is about much more than transport.*

Homebirth mothers have the strongest opportunity to bond with their babies. Oxytocin, the 'hormone of love,' brings joy to our parenting journey, during conception, birth, bonding, breastfeeding and beyond. But, as explained by Dr Michel Odent, it is a shy hormone. It will only be released if the conditions are right.

Oxytocin is released most commonly during lovemaking. "Soon after the birth, when the physiological processes are not disturbed, mothers have the capacity to reach a very high peak of oxytocin. This is possible (in a warm place) if the mother, who is still 'on another planet,' is not distracted at all and has nothing else to do except to feel the contact with her baby's skin, to look into her baby's eyes, and to smell her baby's body." (Michel Odent) Such tender touch, holding and eye contact simultaneously floods the baby's body with oxytocin, which they also receive in breast milk. An instantaneous and deep bond is formed between mother and child which can be reinforced throughout the day through breastfeeding and baby wearing. The decision to homebirth increases the likelihood that the full benefits of oxytocin will be experienced.

The mother baby connection continues following birth through baby wearing. "Babies are genetically programmed to want to be close to you, and preferably, in direct physical contact with you for much of the day. Researchers have verified that when they are carried on their parents' bodies for much of the day, babies tend to cry a lot less, seem to enjoy themselves a lot more and are noticeably more peaceful. Babies love quietly watching the world go by while feeling the warmth of your body, your rhythmic breathing and heartbeat right against them." (Robin Grille, *Heart to Heart Parenting*)

I bought my first sling when I was pregnant with my first child. Like many novices I didn't know if it was well designed or how to use it; I didn't know that there were other styles and models available and I didn't know any other baby wearers. After our hospital birth, I tried my newborn in the sling a few times and it failed to make either of us comfortable. Like many others without support, I promptly shelved it. I held my baby in my arms or pushed her in a pram as I struggled with the tasks of newborn baby care. Fortunately, I rediscovered baby wearing when my daughter was 18 months old and wore her until she was four and I was six months pregnant. We loved this time together—her snuggling on my back, falling asleep or chatting about the world around her. I still occasionally wear her today as a leggy five and a half year old (see photo on page 14).

Before my second child was born I gave away my pram, which had been gathering dust, and expanded my stash of slings. I've now got a better understanding of the benefits of baby wearing. I now know that many of my daily struggles could have been lessened or eliminated if I had worn my baby on my body. This applies to newborns, toddlers and preschoolers. See the table on page 15 for a description of life with and without carriers.

## Carrier safety

Interestingly, the baby carriers that are the least safe are the ones that bring the least physical connection between baby and wearer and are the least comfortable. (The closer the child is to the wearer's body, the more comfortable the carrier.) Unfortunately they are also the most accessible.

Some carriers are poorly designed and pose a suffocation risk (eg. 'bag' slings) or overload the child's spine and neck (eg. parachute harness soft structured carriers).

'Parachute harness' soft structured carriers are the easiest of all carriers to use, however they "position the infant upright, with the legs hanging down and the bodyweight supported at the base of the baby's spine (i.e. at the crotch), it puts undue stress on the spine which can adversely affect the development of the spinal curves and, in some cases, cause spondylolisthesis" and/or a whiplash type injury. Some models are designed with back support for the wearer, but still place most of the load on the upper back, which is exactly where you don't want it.



Unsafe carrier—  
'Bag' sling  
(© Babywearing Basics)

## Safe carrier features

In her article, "Infant Carriers and Spinal Stress", Rochelle Casses, a chiropractor, notes:

- Before an infant can hold her head on her own, the carrier should support the neck. A sling cradles the infant just like your arms would, unlike [*parachute harness*] vertical carriers which can actually allow a whiplash type injury.
- The carrier should not place the infant's spine in a weight bearing position too early\*. The young baby should be horizontal or inclined, with the spine supported along its length [*or held vertically with correct hip positioning and spinal/head support, as in a wrap*].



*Newborns naturally adopt the 'frog leg position', which we copy in upright carriers, positioning the **knees above the bottom***

- When a baby wants to be more upright to see the world around him (usually around age 4 to 5 months), the carrier should allow him to sit cross-legged [or in the 'frog-leg position'], so his weight is dissipated through his legs and hips, as opposed to the style that has the legs hanging down, where the young spine has to bear the entire weight.

\* An infant's spine should only be in a weight bearing position when they can bear their own weight unaided, that is when they can sit on their own. So don't prop your baby up in a pram either!

All good carriers can be used from newborn to preschooler. They can be worn on the front, hip or back and are suitable for a broad range of activities (housework, cooking dinner, shopping, bushwalking etc.). However some carriers are more suitable than others for each activity and age. That's why carrier collections tend to grow!

Different carriers place the weight of the child on different parts of our body—talk to an experienced baby wearer to find out which style is best for you (see 'Baby wearing support' on page 14).

## One-shoulder carriers

One-shoulder carriers cradle small babies in a reclining position (on your front or back) or can be used to hold an older child upright on your front, hip or back.

- Pouch (some brands: Earthsling, Hot Slings, Peanut Shell)
- Ring Sling—unpadded (some brands: Ellaroo, TaylorMade)
- Clip Sling—padded (some brands: Baba Slings, Natures Sway)



**Pouch**  
(no clip or ring)



**Ring Sling**  
showing knees  
above the  
bottom

## Two-shoulder carriers

Two-shoulder carriers hold children in an upright position. As they distribute the weight over two shoulders, they are better suited for carrying for longer periods of time for older babies/toddlers/preschoolers.

- Stretch Wrap 0-6mths, front only (some brands: Hug-A-Bub, Moby)
- Woven Wrap 0-5yrs (some brands: Ellaroo, Storchenwiege)
- Mei Tai (some brands: ABA, Kozy Carrier, CatBird Baby)
- Non-parachute Soft Structured Carriers (some brands: Ergo, Patapum, Pikkilo)



Stretch wrap  
(0-6mths)



Woven wrap  
(0-5yrs)



Mei Tai



Non-parachute  
Soft Structured carriers

## Baby wearing support and choosing a carrier

Despite their flaws, parachute harness carriers are the most popular and readily available, as they are simple to use and inexperienced baby wearers would be unaware of their poor design.

Most safe carriers take time and practice to master. People often abandon them as they find 'my baby didn't like it' or 'it was uncomfortable', but this was simply because they were using it incorrectly or it was not the correct style or size for them. If I had support available at the beginning of my baby wearing journey, it would not have taken me 18 months to get a good carrier that I could use with confidence. I am now surrounded by baby wearers who have helped me to try and then master the more difficult carriers. For this I am grateful, as baby wearing has brought so much joy and intimacy between my kids and I.

My website, *Natural Parenting in Sydney: a guide to services & products*, lists in-real-life and online support groups, carrier suppliers and suppliers of breastfeeding tops (the 'lift the flap style' make breastfeeding in a sling easy).

Please feel free to contact me if you would like to talk through the best carrier for your specific needs or to get advice on the best supplier.

Jenny's Email—visit my website  
[www.npsydney.com.au](http://www.npsydney.com.au)

Jenny's Mobile—0412 970 183 (outside the hours of 12 noon-2:30 pm)

## My experiences of non-baby wearing compared to baby wearing

Activity	Pram or holding (first baby)	Baby wearing (second baby)
Pregnancy		Wore four year old on my back until I was six months pregnant
Birth	Hospital	Home
Breastfeeding	Lengthy feeding sessions on the couch	Lengthy feeding sessions wherever I happen to be (on the train, shopping...) with bub in a pouch sling (as an older baby/toddler I feed in a woven wrap)
Stimulation	Take six week old to the NO WAR rally with 100 000 other concerned citizens, propped up on her dad's shoulder or in a pram	First four weeks of life bub is either in the house or, if out, in a ring sling with the 'tail' covering him
Evenings	Two hours or more of crying; dread dusk as exhausting evening lies ahead	Early evening: Bub asleep in pouch sling whilst family eats dinner together Later: wakes for feed then quiet alert time with dad before going to bed with mum
Cooking	Attempts to butter toast with one hand whilst holding newborn with the other; wait for partner to get home to eat more nourishing meal	Prepare dinner for the family with newborn asleep in a pouch sling (as an older baby/toddler I back wear with a two-shoulder carrier)
Shopping (walking & public transport)	Visit only two local shops with bub in pram before she starts crying, carry her home whilst pushing pram	Go out for hours with bub in a ring sling. Walk, train or bus with shopping in a funky pull along trolley (a two-shoulder carrier is more comfortable for extended wearing with a heavier child)
Errands (in and out of the car)	Get pram in and out of car. Struggle to get bub back in car seat as she feels she is being shunted from place to place	Pop bub in ring sling or pouch (quick & easy). He is happy to hop in and out of car for multiple stops as he is having fun and cuddles in between
Sleep	Put bub to sleep in bed each day as she doesn't sleep easily in the pram and wakes when transferred from the car seat, therefore can't travel far from home	Bub breastfeeds and sleeps in carrier wherever I happen to be—unlimited freedom Newborn in a pouch sling Infant in a ring sling Toddler/preschooler in a woven wrap
Teething/sick days at home	Hold bub in arms whilst struggling to do basic tasks like go to the loo or eat	Wear bub in a ring sling as sick kids can't make up their mind if they want up or down or throw up or nappy change or breastfeed or sleep or...
Hanging out laundry	Hang washing as quickly as possible before bub starts crying in her bouncer nearby	Enjoy the garden whilst hanging washing with bub asleep or awake in a two-shoulder carrier (mei tai or wrap), which allows me to raise my arms above my head (a pouch or ring sling are fine when bub is small/less heavy)
Housework	Get very little done as bub cries in bouncer or toddler wants to be held	Wear bub on back in a two-shoulder carrier and get on with it!