

# BABYWEARING BASICS

By M'Liss Stelzer & edited by Holly McCroskey

***“I tried using a baby carrier but it hurt my back.”***

Keep in mind that a **good baby carrier should hold baby in the same position you would naturally carry him in your arms.** Proper positioning allows babywearing muscles to take the child's weight and carrying baby shouldn't become painful even as he grows and becomes heavier.



Front pack style carry dangles child, strains the back. \*



Natural in-arms carry; child in a seated position.



Natural carrying position in a gauze wrap.

- Make sure the carrier supports the baby **“high and snug.”**

To check for proper positioning place baby in the carrier and then put your arms around her as if she were in your arms. If the in-arms check doesn't feel right then raise, tighten or adjust the carrier. If baby is still low, and the carrier won't go any tighter, you probably need a smaller size or different type.

This “in-arms test” applies to cradle, front, hip and even back carries (reach back and place your hands under baby's bum as if you were giving her a piggy-back ride) with the only exceptions being high-back carry and possibly a soft pack carrier with a hip belt.

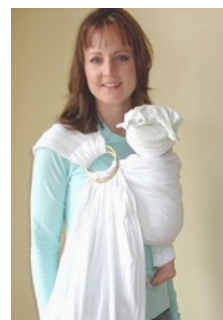
- Use a carrier that **supports and distributes the baby's weight** widely across the back, and as baby gets heavier, or if the wearer has pre-existing back problems, to the waist or hips as well.
- Make sure the **carrier straps and/or fabric are spread evenly**, not twisted, and resting on the most comfortable spot on your body. Shifting things higher or lower, closer in or farther out, can help.

\*Unfortunately, most mass-produced baby carriers sold in department stores are uncomfortable, particularly after the baby reaches 10 or 15 pounds. Front pack carriers cause the baby to hang too far away from the wearer's center of gravity and support the baby mainly by the crotch, allowing legs to dangle straight down; they do not encourage a natural, more comfortable “snuggle” position with the baby's legs up and body curled close to the wearer. Other problems with department store carriers are limited adjustability, straps that offer too little padding and hang close to the parent's neck, stiff fabric and/or weight distribution only to the parent's shoulders and upper back with none to the lower back, waist or hips.

***“I tried a baby carrier but my baby hated it.”***

- **First, determine how baby prefers to be held in arms and then mimic this holding position using the carrier.** For instance, a baby that hates being cradled in arms is going to cry if cradled in a carrier. If the same baby loves being nestled high on mom’s chest then he is likely to be happy and content in the same position in a carrier. Most carriers can be used in a variety of positions.
- **Adjust the carrier to allow baby to hold arms, legs and head in his preferred position.** Some babies like to be snuggled completely inside a carrier, while others prefer to look out and kick; most have different preferences at different times.

**The advantage of unstructured carriers is that they can be adjusted to satisfy even the fussiest baby!**



If baby is in an in-arms position in the carrier, but **still fussy**, try these tips:

- **Make sure the carrier is not pushing the baby’s chin onto her neck, preventing her from breathing easily.** A chin to chest position makes it difficult for the baby to breathe and most infants will cry or fuss until repositioned. Adjust the carrier so that it supports baby’s head and back without forcing her body into an overly curled position. (See the “Correct Positioning” article for more details.)
- **Get moving!** Babies, who are simply upset by the unfamiliarity of the carrier, or picking up on your own tension, will likely calm when you start walking or gently bouncing.
- If none of the above helps, **make sure baby is comfortable**; not hungry, overheated, in need of a diaper change, being pinched by clothing or the carrier, etc.

**As baby gets older she will probably change how she prefers to be held.** If your baby was previously happy and comfortable in your carrier, but is now fussy, then try a new carrying position. The most common ‘requests’ from infants are:

- **Facing out.** After baby passes the newborn sleepy phase he may be more interested in looking at the world around him. Placing baby in a deep pouch and/or facing the parent may make baby complain until he is raised higher in the sling or turned facing out. If baby becomes tired or overwhelmed just turn him facing in. (Some babies may become rapidly over-stimulated when facing out; please follow your baby’s cues when using this position.)



Upright cradle in a pouch.



Kangaroo carry in a ring sling.



Facing out in a mei tai. \*

(\*This is a natural carrying position. Imagine mom were carrying baby in her arms. She would likely have baby tilted back against her chest, one arm under his bum so he is in a seated position with legs flexed up and mother would have one arm across his chest for support. Notice baby is positioned in the carrier the same way he would be were he in mom’s arms.)

- **Legs out.** Most newborns are fairly content to have their legs curled inside the carrier, just like in the womb; however, once some infants get older and taller they may insist on stretching their legs. If your baby is fussy, pushing off with his legs or trying to stand up in the carrier, then position baby legs out.

***“I’ve tried different carriers, everything I can think of and my back still hurts and my baby cries every time I put him in. Help!”***

Either the carrier is being used incorrectly or it is not the right carrier for the parent or baby. This is where one-on-one help with an experienced babywearer is useful. However, if help from another babywearer isn’t available there are other resources.

For “semi-live” help with your carrier there is a wonderful DVD available. The *Tummy 2 Tummy* DVD has a total of 2 ½ hours of information on pouches, ring slings, mei tais and wraps (available at [www.tummy2tummy.com](http://www.tummy2tummy.com) as well as several other Internet retailers).

The website [www.wearyourbaby.org](http://www.wearyourbaby.org) has baby carrier information and video streams.

[www.thebabywearer.com](http://www.thebabywearer.com) has a wonderful forum and the mamas (and dads) there are always willing to help troubleshoot problems.

*Babywearing: The Benefits and Beauty of This Ancient Tradition* by Maria Blois, M.D. is a comprehensive book about why babywearing is important as well as choosing and using a baby carrier.

(Photos by the author as well as ZoloWear and Kozy Carrier.)