

Toddler Carrying

Zoe Woodman
discusses the benefits

The term 'babywearing' is becoming increasingly popular to describe the act of using an aid to carry your child. The benefits of carrying newborns during the fourth trimester to help them with the transition from womb to world are well documented, and it is becoming commonplace to see babies being carried. However, this practice is not exclusive to babies. What about as your baby gets older, becoming more aware and independent, into toddlerhood and beyond?

Why carry an older child?

Accessibility. You can visit places that would be very challenging otherwise. We are often outdoors, exploring the wonderful Surrey Hills.

Convenience. For some it is simply a convenient option. There are steps on our walk to school, so I carry my son – we are often in a rush and I find it easier than trying to walk with a reluctant toddler.

Connecting. Tired, sad or over-stimulated children can benefit from a hug, while you still have your hands to use. It can also be a useful way to reconnect with your child.

Often, carrying older children encompasses all of these. Mum of two Claire Young has carried her toddler in a sling for events where using a buggy wasn't practical. "We recently went to a festival with our children. Molly is 4, and we found the sling really useful. We walked miles and I carried her daily, especially in the evenings. She loved it. Last year we used it for an event in London. It was great not to have to push through the crowds with a buggy, which, being low down, could have been overwhelming for her. Instead she could see what was going on; also, I knew exactly where she was, so I only had to keep check on my older child."

We have carried all of our children. Our first we carried as a baby, and less as she grew. Our second child has been carried more, out of necessity, enabling me to bond with him while still having my hands free to parent our eldest, who started school when her brother was 6 months old. He was carried daily until he was far older, so we moved onto a toddler carrier. He is now 3½, and we

still use it. Our youngest child has been carried the most. Being able to have him close while still being available to our other children has made our lives easier. Continuing to carry our second child has meant continuity and closeness for him while he adjusts to life with a new sibling. We get lots of comments when carrying him. Most are positive, but society isn't used to seeing older children being carried. The more I learn, the more I believe it is important to carry older children.

Carrying can help toddler development

A huge amount of development occurs in toddlerhood and the preschool years: speech and brain development, learning about social interaction, and emotional development. Early nurturing, learning experiences and physical health from birth to age 5 greatly impact on success in adulthood and are most critical between 1 and 3 years of age. It is less common for children of these ages to be carried, at a period that is hugely significant in their development. Research shows the importance of physical contact in forming an attachment (a strong relationship between infant and primary caregiver). The critical period for developing this is from birth to 5 years. Carrying your toddler helps to foster a secure attachment through close contact while also being able to do other things such as shopping, or parenting other children.

Language development peaks from 1 to 4 years of age, and research shows that the acquisition of speech is greatly facilitated when a caregiver holds, smiles at and talks to a child. Using a sling enables us to hold our children for longer periods than we would in arms and allows us to be involved in more varied social experiences and activities, as it means we have our hands free. Suzanne Zeedyk, a developmental psychologist at the University of Dundee, observed that interactions doubled in number and were more varied when using parent-facing buggies than when using world-facing buggies.¹ It follows that having your child in a sling will actively involve him in conversations, interactions and social experiences, and thus help aid speech development.

In a study of parents accompanied by young children on shopping trips, Ken Blaiklock of the Unitech Institute of Technology in >

> Auckland, New Zealand found that the children who were carried or were parent-facing had the most interactions.² The more interactions a child has, the more speech is encouraged, and interactions are promoted when a child is close to the caregiver. Carrying your toddler enables more opportunities for the back-and-forth conversations that promote language development.

Another group of researchers found a link between maternal touch and brain activity and connectivity in older children.³ They stated: "There is already substantial literature looking at the positive effects of touch in infants. Our work adds by [...] extending this to an older age group, suggesting that benefits exist beyond infancy." Carrying an older child may have far-reaching implications, and these areas are just beginning to be explored.

Why use a toddler/preschooler-specific carrier?

There are some particular considerations when carrying older children, though it is not necessary to buy a toddler/preschooler-specific carrier. Most soft structured carriers have an upper weight limit of 18–20kg. The average 3-year-old weighs 12–14kg, so most standard carriers will be suitable as it is safe to use these up to the limit given. However, as a child grows taller the panel of the carrier will not come up as high on her back. This can feel less supportive to both wearer and child, especially if the child tends to lean out, putting strain on the wearer's shoulders. As a child's legs grow, the carrier may not fit "knee to knee" (with her thighs supported from one knee pit to the other). While this situation is not ideal, it is less crucial in an older child whose hip joints are developed, is weight-bearing on her legs, and uses her joints and muscles by crawling or walking. It is important for carrying to be comfortable for both wearer and child; achieving a good position with a tilted pelvis creating the 'M' position will help achieve this.⁴

Carriers vary in size, so one brand of toddler carrier may be bigger than another. It is worth checking⁵ or visiting a sling library to try some on.

Ring slings are great for quick up and downs as little legs get tired, or for short journeys. These take up very little space, so they are easy to bring with you. As you can adjust the width and height, they are a flexible option, although they do require some learning to adjust correctly and get a good fit.

Woven wraps are the ultimate in flexibility, as you can vary the type of carry depending on the size of the wrap and the size of the child. It may be necessary to try different carries or different types of fabric if the wearer needs

additional support, for example using a multilayer carry or choosing more robust fabric. Stretchy wraps (apart from hybrid stretchies) are not suitable for older children.

Can I carry my toddler if I didn't when he was a baby?

YES! Often older children love having piggybacks or being carried in arms, so they are likely to enjoy the closeness a carrier can provide.

You may need to try short periods of carrying at first if he and you are not used to it. Practise beforehand if you have a specific event at which you wish to carry. It is also essential to practise getting him onto your back so that you can do this safely, either over a soft surface or with someone to watch you. There are a few methods, such as hip scooting, or, if your child is able to climb, getting him to hold on with his arms and legs like a piggyback, and then, with the straps loosened, pulling the carrier up over his back.

The benefits of carrying go far beyond the infant stage, impacting positively on many areas of development in toddlers and preschoolers. Carrying has potential as a therapeutic intervention with children who are missing secure attachments, in social care, or in cases such as fostering, adoption and prolonged separation, to help build secure attachments. It is the attachment, the closeness, the connection and the interactions that matter. Carrying allows this to happen with older children, more organically and more consistently and frequently. ●

References

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3. Jens Brauer et al., 'Frequency of Maternal Touch Predicts Resting Activity and Connectivity of the Developing Social Brain', *Cerebral Cortex*, 26:8 (2016), 3544–52. tinyurl.com/maternal-touch
4. www.sheffieldslingsurgery.co.uk/beyond-the-knee-to-knee/
5. southeastslings.co.uk/carrier-comparison/

Email info@theslingconsultancy.co.uk for the full reference list.

Find out more

www.slingpages.co.uk
to find a consultant or sling library

Why Babywearing Matters
by Rosie Knowles, Pinter & Martin

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