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Cultures Without Colic: Breastfeeding & Other Baby Lessons from the !Kung San

To get a deeper understanding of the relationship between [colic](#) and breastfeeding, it's good to take cues from other cultures. For example: the !Kung San (or African bushmen) have lived in isolation on the plains of the Kalahari Desert for thousands of years. Over the past forty years, however, the !Kung have allowed scientists to observe their lives, including how they care for babies.

I've read reports of the !Kung newborn care with great interest because their **infants hardly ever cry!** It's not that they never cry – it's that they never CRY! (And I know you understand the distinction.) !Kung infants get upset as often as our babies do, but their parents are so skilled that their babies' fussing bouts average only sixteen seconds in duration – and over 90% end in under a minute. For parents struggling with colic in our culture, this sounds too good to be true.

What the !Kung secret? What ancient wisdom do they that know that we have forgotten? I believe this tribe's stunning success is based on three main factors:

1. Constant holding
2. Immediate responding
3. Very frequent breastfeeding

Although the !Kung have few material possessions, they have the luxury of having lots of cuddle time with their babies. !Kung mothers carry their babies all day long in leather slings and sleep next to them at night. This closeness makes it easy to soothe fussiness right from the start, to keep it from building up into full-on colic.

Since !Kung parents spend so much time close to their babies, it's easy for them to comfort their babies' cries quickly – usually within ten seconds!

In addition to holding and cuddling, the !Kung calm their babies by putting extra emphasis on breastfeeding. They give quick little feedings 3-4 times an hour. That's 50-100 times a day!

We in the West might think that all this lavish and immediate attention would spoil a baby, but that's not the case. !Kung children generally grow up to be happy, independent, and well-adjusted.

Of course, I'm not suggesting we adopt all the !Kung ways – but by studying their successful parenting practices, Western moms and dads can glean some helpful tips – especially for parents dealing with poor infant sleep, excessive infant crying, and colic.

Tags: [Colic](#)

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Responses to "Cultures Without Colic: Breastfeeding & Other Baby Lessons from the !Kung San"



Deborah Says:

I know that some people believe its possible to spoil newborns by giving them too much attention, but I just don't see how this can be possible! Like you said in your book, our babies are born more like fetuses and need to be nurtured through their "fourth trimester". This is where the swaddling technique makes so much sense, and has helped so many parents avoid the dreaded colic. Looking to the example of some tribal cultures, where colicky babies rarer, seems pretty spot on to me!



Dad 3 times Says:

My wife and I have raised 3 children in the U.S. using exactly these techniques. I call it "Gorilla Parenting" because baby gorillas spend their entire first year of life hanging on to, held by or within arms-length of a parent. We are now co-sleeping with our 6 month old boy and have two older girls who were raised as infants the same way. He breast fed frequently

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and on demand as an infant is now breast feeding only at night. Life is good, baby and Mom are happy and everyone is sleeping through the night.



Michelle Says:

When I was studying in Ghana, West Africa I noticed some similarities to what this article points out. First, I rarely heard a baby cry. I attributed this to the fact that babies are “worn” so much—either by the parent or a sibling or another relative. When I returned to the United States, I actually found it so strange that babies were carried in these huge car seats and were so far away from their parents’ bodies.

Also helpful for new mothers was the fact that so many people live with extended families. These helped the mom with baby care and daily activities such as meal prep and laundry. Here we are in the West trying to “to it all ourselves!” No wonder we have such a high rate of post partum depression.



Dr_Karp Says:

interesting...thanks for sharing!



Dr_Karp Says:

Hi Laura,

Thanks so much for sharing your story with everyone! Many colicky babies grow up to be super-sensitive, or super-spirited (or both!!). I find the best ways to help sleep for a 4 year old are: 1) 60 minutes before bedtime, turn down lights 50%, turn off TV/computer, turn on white noise CD (track 6) played softly; 2) use CD all night/naps as loud as a shower; 3) encourage a lovey (blankie, favorite toy – even a hard toy works sometimes, special sheets, etc)

Good luck!

Dr. Karp



Nesta Says:

Hello..I'm very interested in reading the actual studies on the !Kung tribes care of babies. Would you mind citing this source so I could dig a little deeper? And any other field studies on indigenous baby care that you recommend?

Thanks!



Dr_Karp Says:

Hi Nesta, I think you will like- Konner, M, Hunter-Gatherer Infancy: The !Kung and others. In Hewlett BS and Lamb ME, eds. Hunter-Gatherer Childhoods: Evolution, development and cultural perspectives. p19-64, Aldine Transactions 2005 Have fun! Dr. Karp



Dr_Karp Says:

Yes...slings are a great way to give your baby the comforting closeness they love..and letting you have your hands free to do your chores...just be careful to keep your baby away from hot things in the kitchen!



Elizabeth Says:

I agree with the methods the women in this tribe use. I am doing it now with my new baby (2nd son) and it has been the best most peaceful experience of my life. I breast feed to sooth him and for eating, or if he gets fussy. He never cries, rarely gets upset, everyone comments on how happy my baby is. I love it.

With my first baby it was not a good experience to say the least, I wish I had not followed the pediatrician advise, “you must supplement with formula” they told me. The worst advise ever. In my opinion the more you breast feed the more production of milk you have. My second baby is chunky and happy. My first baby on top of , fussy, unhappy etc etc, we just found out now at 3 years of age that he is allergic to milk, Hello, you would think that pediatricians would check for allergies but they do not. I think if you have a fussy baby , check for allergies first. Something I wish I had done.

Well back to breast feeding , my baby is now 9 months and he is the happiest most content baby around. Also he sleeps with me wish has been great, he wakes up for a second at night he gets on my breast and falls back asleep right away. When he feels my closeness he is content.

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