

Need an accessory? Wear your baby

MARTA GOLD

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First came celebrities sporting tiny dogs in big handbags as living, breathing, fashion accessories.

Now, in a Hollywood-esque progression of logic, celebrity babies in stylish carriers have become a fashion must-have. While little Shiloh Jolie-Pitt or Kingston Stefani-Rossdale can't be mass-marketed, the baby slings Brad and Gwen are using to cart them around town are now all the rage.

Dozens of companies are producing high-fashion baby slings for today's hip, "baby-wearing" parents. The clunky, plastic baby seats and awkward, metal-framed backpacks of yore have been replaced by softer, body-hugging slings, wraps and carriers.

Julia Roberts, Marcia Cross and Keri Russell are some of the other celebrity moms who have recently taken up baby-wearing.

"Baby-wearing is just that.

That's your new accessory," says Cheryl Kasianiuk, owner of Bosom Babies in Edmonton.

She says she's seen a huge increase in the number of parents looking for baby carriers of all kinds recently. "It's grown by leaps and bounds. I used to sell maybe one a month. Now I'm probably selling 10 a day."

Her store carries at least 20 styles of carriers. Prices range from about \$50 to \$150.

Amanda Whiting, who works at the store and has a wardrobe of 14 different carriers for her own baby and toddler, says it's hard to keep up with all the new ones coming on the market.

"Baby-wearing is really gaining popularity. Those of us who are a little more 'crunchy' intend to wear our babies for different reasons, but then when we go out, people are always stopping us and asking about it."

Baby-wearing is convenient, comfortable and healthy for infants, allowing parents to keep close tabs on little ones, says

Kasianiuk. That's why it has long appealed to "earthy" moms and dads.

More recently, with the example of celebrity parents to follow and the whole "yummy-mummy" image to uphold, fashion-conscious moms (and dads) have taken up the practice, she adds.

The explosion in the number available is largely thanks to "mom-preneurs" who have produced their own individual takes on baby carriers to sell both at retail stores and online, says Kasianiuk. Brands like Z'fina and Pippalily were both developed by Canadian moms.

Many manufacturers have modified the traditional pouch-sling design, offering them in beautiful fabrics, trendy colours and a variety of styles. Also popular is the modern take on the traditional Asian mei tai, a cloth carrier that ties over both shoulders and around the body. The modern version looks much like a soft backpack that can be worn in front or back.

"We're making them a fashion piece," says Christian Wolters of Z'fina, whose business partner and sister, Nicola, started making slings about two years ago. "Slings have always been regarded in the past as something a little more earthy, a little more granola. Now we find they're coming into the mainstream."

Z'fina has just developed the "man-sling" for dads, or for moms who prefer a sleekier, sporty-looking sling. An Alaskan company called Cabin Baby makes cold-weather baby slings of polar fleece.

And several companies now make play-carriers for kids who want to wear their dolls or stuffed animals.

Several baby-wearing parents say they do it for the convenience and for the benefits of keeping their child close to them.

Devon Toepfer became a baby-wearer when he was at home full time with his baby son, now 2½. He wears his six-month-old daughter regularly

too. "I get a lot of people pointing or nudging their neighbour, like, 'Look, a dad wearing a baby,'" he says.

Carriers are convenient for shopping, especially in stores crowded with strollers. They're also great for the bus, where strollers can be cumbersome.

"I recommend them to everybody," he adds. "It's absolutely the way to go."