

GROUP PORTRAITS

Photographing medium to large groups takes special considerations and planning. Here are some tips to help get you through.

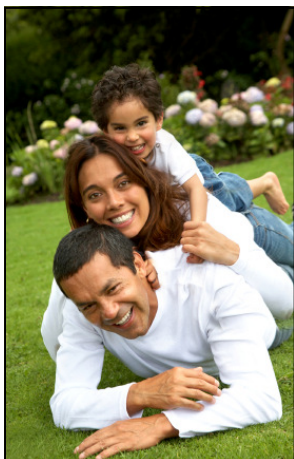
PLAN AHEAD

When you are booked for a group session make sure you collect all the information you can about how many people will be included, the location you will be using, what the occasion of the portrait is, etc. The more information you have, the better prepared you will be to meet their needs. If the location is an unfamiliar one, schedule a time to check it out ahead of time. Familiarize yourself with what's available in terms of lighting and backgrounds. If the portrait will be taken outside, you will also need to take note of the available lighting at that time of day, as well as locations where the lighting will be good. (You don't want half of the group shrouded in shadow while the other half is in bright sunlight.) Also, it would be a good idea to recommend that the group coordinate their outfits, for a nicer looking portrait. (See *"Preparing for Your Portrait Session"* for information you can pass along to the group.) Finally, if the group is large enough to warrant it, be sure to schedule an assistant to help out on the day of the session. An extra pair of hands goes a long way when working with large groups.



POSING THE GROUP

Groups often pose themselves without much prompting. However, there are a few things you can do to improve the overall composition of the photo:



- Small to medium sized groups should be posed one person at a time.
- Subjects wearing bright colors (or anything that stands out) should be positioned in the middle of the group.
- Group photos should express a feeling of unity. Have the subjects either touching each other, or positioned so they are close together and visually overlapping.
- For formal group pictures position taller individuals towards the back and center of the group. For more casual pictures position taller people spread throughout the back at random to create a more laid-back image.
- If the group portrait is in conjunction with a special event for an individual (or a few people), place that individual in the center of the group. Do some shots with everyone facing you, and some shots with everyone looking at that person. (e.g. weddings, bar mitzvahs, etc.)
- Don't be afraid to go with a non-traditional pose. Use the surroundings, as well as the occasion, to your advantage, in creating a unique and memorable portrait.

COMPOSITION

Consider the surroundings in the location. Are they surroundings that will contribute to the feel of the portrait, or detract from it? If the surroundings are distracting, the composition should minimize them as much as possible. If the surrounding might contribute to the portrait (such as a dance class in the studio) use it in the composition of the photo to add to feel of the image.

Another thing to consider is overall composition. The basic rules of composition still apply to portraits. Check to make sure the image in the viewfinder is pleasing and that your eyes are drawn to the group. Make sure that other elements in the photo complement the portrait, and do not detract from it. Finally, since it is, above all, a portrait, make sure that you have gotten in as close as is reasonable, so that you can clearly see the faces of the subjects.



LIGHTING

Proper lighting is crucial in any fine portrait, and it becomes even more important with groups. Insufficient lighting will leave the subjects in one another's shadows and the details of the photo will be lost. Unfortunately, there is no one solution that will work for every group portrait. The circumstances will change from location to location. For indoor lighting, try to light the group from the front as much as possible. If you position your lights too far to the sides the light fall off will create shadows on the faces. Outdoor lighting can create a nice look, if the sun is in a good position in the sky. Be sure not to position yourself with the sun behind you, or you will get a group full of squinting faces. Because the lighting circumstances vary so much in these situations, be sure to check out the location ahead of time, so you are fully aware of what you have to work with, and what you might need to bring with you.



BE THE DIRECTOR

“Be the director” is a common phrase that gets tossed around, and with good reason. People will expect you to communicate with them clearly, telling them what you want them to do. The more communication there is, the better the subjects can do what you need. This is especially important with groups, when there are so many subjects to manage. Be clear with them about what you need. Keep them motivated and entertained. Let them know how long you'll need them for. Tell them if you will be doing a few different poses, so they know what to expect. The more you communicate with a group, the more engaged they will be, and the better chance you have of getting pictures back where everyone is not only looking at the camera, but also smiling and having a good time!

PRESSING THE BUTTON

Here are just a few things to think about when you're finally ready to start shooting pictures. First of all, make sure you take plenty of shots. The larger the group, the more chances that someone is blinking or looking away. Here's one idea to help minimize the blinking problem: Have everyone close their eyes, and then open them all at the same time when you tell them to. In that first instant hopefully all of the eyes will be open. Feel free to come up with other tricks of your own. Another thing to consider is the timing of the shot. If you're going for a serious shot, make sure everyone is composed and ready. If the shot is supposed to be more fun and relaxed, tell a joke and then take the picture when everyone is laughing. Good timing can make a good picture great!

GET CREATIVE

Don't feel limited to traditional shots. Explore different ways of positioning the group. Find creative ways to frame the shot. Try a few shots where everyone in the group is looking at their neighbors, or interacting with each other. Even though no one will be looking directly at the camera, it may be a favorite shot that shows a sense of community in the group. Really, try anything that comes to you. Take the traditional shots first, but then have a little fun. The customers may just be pleasantly surprised. And a unique portrait is one that gets noticed, gets asked about, and gets you more business!



HAVE A GOOD TIME

This is the most important rule for any portrait situation. It's just natural that if you're having a good time, your enthusiasm will be contagious. And when that enthusiasm spreads to the subjects, you'll get better shots of them. So enjoy yourself out there!