

PHOTOGRAPHING SMALL CHILDREN

Small children present complications of their own, whether you are photographing them as a part of a group or by themselves. They have very short attention spans, don't always understand what's going on, and certainly can't smile on demand. When you know you'll be working with young kids, planning ahead will go a long way. Here are a few tips to help get you through your session.



PREPARE THE PARENTS

There are a few important things to review with parents ahead of time, so they'll know what to expect the day of the portrait session. First and foremost, find out what style of portraits the parents are interested in having taken. Some parents will lean towards more traditional styles and others will want something a little more unique. Knowing what they're looking for, and then creating that type of portrait for them, will bring them back again and again.

It's also advisable to discuss what the child will be wearing for the portrait. Kids tend to be finicky about what they wear. If the parent is interested in a more casual portrait recommend that they let their child help choose the outfit, thereby ensuring that they'll be comfortable in it. If the parent wants a more formal portrait, perhaps with their child dressed in Sunday best, it's a good idea for them to prepare the kids ahead of time. Have the parents show the child, days in advance, what they will be wearing, and try to get them excited about it. That way they're at least prepared. (Surprising a child by asking him to wear a necktie doesn't generally result in a smiling child!)

Finally, provide the parents with a list of items that they might want to bring with them to the session. Hairbrushes, clips, hairspray, etc. are recommended as well as a few toys or other items that the child might enjoy playing with. These items can serve two different functions. On one hand, they are helpful to have around when the child is throwing a fit. A familiar toy or book from home can help distract them and calm them down. Also, objects like these can make great props in the portrait! They help the child feel more comfortable in front of the camera, and the portrait reflects more personality. A few ideas are: toys, books, a blanket or stuffed animal, pets, or hats. Have the parent bring a few of these small items and you'll be glad to have them available.

YOUR OWN PREPARATION

There are two valuable things you can do to guarantee better sessions with children. The first is an ongoing education about the nature of children. Understanding them and what makes them tick will allow you to connect with them better – on their level. Do what you can to learn about

children, and have strategies developed to deal with them. Prepare yourself for how to respond to their many different personalities, and the many different moods they all experience. All of these things will enable you to connect with the child and help them feel comfortable. And that's the most important ingredient in creating a great portrait!



The other thing you should do to prepare yourself is ask the parent about the child. Find out what their individual personality is like, what their temperament is like. Allowing the parents to prepare you in this way will help *you* know what to expect on the day of the session. It will also help you when planning your strategy. It will also further enable you to connect with the child. And finally, think of how much you'll impress the parents if you show interest in their child, beyond them being "just another subject." They'll already have a higher opinion of you as a photographer, before you've even taken a shot!

EQUIPMENT

There are three main choices for lighting: available light, flash or continuous lighting. If there is sufficient light available, this is almost always preferable as it will allow you the most flexibility. However, many situations require additional lighting. If you must use flash lighting, you'll want to limit how often you are using the flash, as it will be harsh on the child and will affect their mood. For that reason, continuous lighting is best, if you have it available. There are more and more continuous lighting options on the market. No longer do you have to use "hot lights" that are really quite hot and not at all color balanced. There are great fluorescent lights that are cool, daylight balanced and flicker free. These are ideal for use in child portraits as they allow you to shoot over and over again without having to fire a flash at the child repeatedly. Regardless of what lighting you will use, set it up in a way that will allow the most flexibility, and allow the child some freedom of movement.

There are a few additional considerations with regards to equipment. First of all, you should plan on hand-holding your camera, rather than using a tripod. For one thing, this will feel less intimidating to the child (and more natural). More importantly, it will allow you to move freely – which is important since children move a lot. Keep in mind that it is important to shoot on their level, rather than looking down at them. Also, make sure that you have enough memory (if shooting digital) or film to be able to shoot frequently and rapidly. Some of the best child portraits come in between the posed shots, and you want to be free to capture those moments. Finally, here is an incredibly important tip – be sure to have everything set up and ready **BEFORE** the child arrives. Make sure all batteries are charged, have your lights set up, have anything you might need during the session handy, etc. If everything is ready to go when the child gets there, then he doesn't have to wait around and grow uncomfortable or moody while you set up. And that leads nicely into the next tip...

BUILD TRUST

There are a few simple things you can do to earn the child's trust, and it will make all the difference during your session. The first thing you can do should really go without saying, but just in case... Learn their name! Even if you are working with multiple children, learn all of their names! This will make them feel more connected to you than any cute pet names you might otherwise use. The next step is just as easy – Take a few minutes to get to know them (on their level). If you've done your homework, you should already have some information from the parent about the child's personality and interests. Get down on their level and draw them out in conversation. Connect with them. You will have more positive results with this than if you hurry right into taking pictures. Finally, once you *do* finally get started, allow some “warm up time.” Don't expect to get the best shots in the first five minutes. Rather, allow the child to become comfortable with you, the equipment, the surroundings and the circumstances. Understand that it will take them a few minutes to relax and get comfortable. Maybe start off with a more laid back approach and only get more serious when you feel the child is more comfortable. All of these things will help you gain the trust of the child, and that will help you capture the best portraits!



GET THEM INVOLVED

Children love being treated like “big kids.” It makes them feel special, important. Something you can do to create those feelings is to involve them in the process. Allow them to explore their curiosities. Show them your equipment, and let them use it if they're interested. (With your assistance, of course.) Answer any questions they may have. Doing a simple thing like that can help them feel less intimidated by your equipment and by the circumstances. Also, if you feel like they might respond well to it, you can periodically ask them if they'd like to suggest a pose, or if they have something specific they'd like to try. Most of the time it'll be pretty silly, but occasionally you'll stumble across a gem in the process! Either way, they'll have some fun and might respond more to your suggestions. Involving the child in the process is a great way to help them feel more comfortable and relaxed during the session.

GET HELP WHEN YOU NEED IT

Sometimes a child simply won't respond to your attempts to get them to open up and feel comfortable. In any situation where one thing isn't working – don't force the issue, try a different approach. Often it can be as simple as recruiting a parent or sibling to help. They can play games with the child, attract their attention with a toy, or any number of other things to get them to smile for you. And sometimes the added presence of someone in their comfort zone is enough to help them relax. Just remember, if something isn't working, try something else.

MOOD CHANGES



As everyone knows, children’s moods change often and dramatically. Be flexible in your session, and anticipate the possibility of these mood swings. When children get upset or throw fits, allow them time to calm down. If you attempt to continue posing them and shooting pictures, the situation will only get worse. Instead, give them a break and let them relax. Give them something to distract themselves with, such as a book or toy. If necessary, allow the parent to help calm the child.

There are a few preventative measures you can take to try to minimize the risk of mood swings. One of the most valuable things you can do is to keep as few people as possible in the room with you. Ideally, it should just be you and the subject. However, if a parent is necessary for the child’s comfort, allow them to remain. But a portrait session is not a spectator sport. The more people you have sitting around watching, the more distractions the child will be battling with. (Not to mention the ability of siblings to tease each other!) It’s also important to be aware of other things in the area that could be potentially distracting, and minimize them as much as possible. Keep in mind that a little background music will calm some children, while it will only further distract others. Being aware and in control of these factors will help prevent and manage any moods swings that may come along during your session.

CAPTURING THEIR SPIRITS

In any portrait, it is especially important to let the personality of the subject shine through. When working with children, you may have to work a little harder to accomplish that, but it will be worth it! It is crucial that the child feel comfortable with you and with the setting they are in. Be friendly and open with them, talking to them on their level. Be sure to smile a lot, and help them relax. You can tell jokes, or do something funny to make them laugh, or you can have them say something silly before pressing the shutter button. Another thing that helps the child relax, and helps you capture who they truly are, is photographing them doing something natural. Depending on your location, here are a few ideas: Swinging on a swing set, reading a book, playing with dolls, coloring, dancing, etc. Find out what the child’s interests are and use them to your advantage! When children are doing something they enjoy they tend to be much more cooperative! Finally, always have your finger ready to press that shutter button, when a precious moment comes along – whether or not it was planned. Sometimes those moments make the best portraits!



USING PROPS

Props, when used properly can really add to the feel of a portrait. They can be especially useful when working with young children, giving them something to attract their attention and keep them focused. A few fun prop ideas are: hats, flowers, books, toys, stuffed animals, bells, balloons, fairy wings, etc. You can also suggest that the child bring a small item from home. That way it's something they feel comfortable with, and it's more personal. When using props, be sure to keep it simple. Too many props can overwhelm the portrait, leaving the subject looking secondary. For the same reason, it's also important to pay attention to color tones of the props, to be sure they are complementing the portrait, instead of becoming a distraction. Don't feel like you have to always use props with child portraits, just remember it as a good option to use when needed, or wanted.

COMPOSITION

Here are just a few points worth remembering on composition. In all portraits, the focus should be the eyes. Be sure that nothing else in the frame is distracting from that focus. In addition, when shooting children, be sure to get down on their level. This will not only make them feel more comfortable, but will give you a much more pleasing result. Finally, if you feel that the child is comfortable, get in a little closer. Fill the frame with their face and capture those timeless expressions they make.

A STRONG FINISH

Children don't have the same patience that adults do. So, chances are, by the time you're done with your session, they're REALLY done! Go out of your way to end on a high note for them. Maybe they'd like to do a few goofy poses. You can let them decide how they want to pose, and then show them the shot when it's taken (if you're shooting digital). Or, maybe they'd like to take a picture of their own. You can hold the camera for them, and let them look through it and choose something to take a picture of. Any number of ideas like these will help end the session on a good note, and hopefully the child will want to come back and do it again!

