1 | Getting Started with Family Portraits

For a large majority of portrait photographers, the idea of creating a photography business stems from a passion for taking pictures of people. But how do you get started photographing families? How do you turn a hobby into a business? Or if establishing a business doesn't appeal to you, how do you take the passion you have for taking pictures and create beautiful, timeless memories for future generations of your family?

In this chapter, I discuss how to get started taking family portraits. First you need to determine what style of portrait photography appeals to you most, and then you need to look at the type of equipment you will need to get started.

Determine Your Portrait Style

The first thing to think about before you start to photograph families is the style of portraits that appeals to you and to the clientele you want to work with the most. Are you more of a traditionalist or a candid photojournalistic photographer? Often both styles can be blended together. You can also market different styles of family portraits to a different demographic of clients. I have found that the style also can be dictated by the age of the family. Young parents with young children often request a more candid style of portraits than families with older children and grandchildren, who often prefer a more traditional style of portraits.

It's fairly easy to create candid images of young children running, playing, and interacting with their parents or older siblings. It is usually hard to get young children to pose for any amount of time, so a candid approach is sometimes to only way to go. On the other hand, candid style portraits don't always work with older children or even older parents. For example, can you imagine a couple of teenagers rolling down a hill holding hands or being thrown up in the air by Dad?

Further, sometimes the style of your portraits is dictated by the personalities of the family. I have worked with some families that are playful and affectionate with each other and that makes it really easy to get more casual, fun images. I have also photographed families that are rigid and quite awkward when I have asked them to lean into each other or get close. This is one of the reasons a pre-portrait consultation is so important (more on this in Chapter 8). Getting to know the personality and style of the family you will be working with before the session helps you plan for the type and style of portraits you will be creating.

Lifestyle/Candid Portraits

Do those wonderful carefree images that look photojournalistic "just happen?" In most cases the answer is no. True candid or photojournalistic images happen when the subject is totally unaware of the camera; they capture an unexpected moment without the subject knowing it. The lifestyle/candid portrait style I refer to is something more along the idea of staged or directed photography that looks as if it were candid.

Often staging or directing is involved when it comes to creating successful candid images. Let's face it: You plan a session, talk about the best time of day, choose clothing and a location, and then direct the subjects in some sort of way to create the images you have in mind. This style of portrait may not be completely posed, but it is orchestrated to a certain degree.

One of my all time favorite "journalistic" images was actually staged. The image "The Kiss by the Hotel de Ville" is one of the most famous photographs by photographer Robert Doisneau. "The Kiss by the Hotel de Ville" was actually planned and staged. For many years people thought it was an incredible candid moment between two

lovers on the streets of Paris, when in fact it was the manifestation of the photographer's imagination. It was quite the scandal when the truth was revealed. Apparently when the original negatives were found, they included many different frames of the famous image.

My mentor Monte Zucker used this Doisneau quote all the time, and it still rings true for me today:

{ I don't photograph life as it is,
but life as I would like it to be.
—Robert Doisneau }

I think this quote is true of family portraits, too. All families have their issues, ups and downs, and crazy moments, but when a group comes together for a portrait, each member puts his best foot forward. It's a time to celebrate the love within a family. It's my job as a portrait photographer to let the best of each family shine through.

The point of the story behind "The Kiss by the Hotel de Ville" is that as an artist and photographer, it is your job to create the images you envision. Have a vision in your mind of what you want to capture for each of your families and then make it happen. Your images can have a traditional feel or a more candid feel. Creating consistently good images isn't a game of luck; that is, by shooting 1,000 images, you hope to get a few good ones from each session. Consistent quality in your work takes thought and planning.

Figure 1.1
When you're photographing really young children, it's difficult to get posed or formal portraits. This looks like a fun candid image on the beach but it is staged.

Figure 1.2
Rossi, the little girl, was just starting to walk. For this shot I had her mom Laura bend down and hold her and look at something in the distance.

Figure 1.3
For this image I had Josh and his son Rhett play by the shore. At Rhett's age it's more fun and natural to create candid images.

You want to create portraits that will make your clients look their best, feel their best, and ultimately be a part of their lives for years to come.

In the series of images shown in Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3, I photographed the family on a beach (an informal location) and let them sort of play in a directed way.

The next series of images, shown in Figure 1.4, were created to look "candid," but each image is set up. In the top image, I had the little girls play ring around the rosy. I placed them in an area with beautiful light and a great background. Their faces are priceless as they spin each other around. To create the image in the middle, I had Madi lay on her belly in the grass and then had Anna lay on Madi's back. They thought this was hysterical. Again, even though this shot may seem candid and natural, the girls were intentionally set up to get this shot. For the image on the bottom, I had the girls lie next to each other, put their arms around each other, and tickle each other. Again, this image appears to be candid, but it is posed.

Figure 1.4
These little girls were three years old and not about to sit for a portrait. It was more fun to photograph them as the playful little girls they were.

Figure 1.5
A two-year-old boy is unlikely to sit for a "formal" portrait. And, if he does, you have about
20 seconds to take the picture and hope that he is making a face Mom will like.

I love the images shown in Figures 1.5 and 1.6 because they are perfect examples of
how creating a formal portrait with young children who are just not that into it is
next to impossible.

Figure 1.6
These two images offer a great example of how to turn the session around to get really beautiful portraits while letting a two-year-old be a two-year-old.

Figure 1.7
A casual stroll along the shoreline creates a fun and relaxed family portrait.

Even older family groups can have a casual feel to them if the location allows. The beach is a great location for the casual portrait shown in Figure 1.7. Walking along the shoreline holding hands is a great way to create a candid-like portrait.

Posed Portraits

Posed portraits tend to be more formal and structured than candid portraits. In most cases, the subjects are looking at the camera. Posing props such as furniture or posing stools are often used. With posed portraits, paying attention to hand placement, the direction of the body, the placement of feet, and head tilts and turns are all important aspects. Figures 1.8–1.13 illustrate examples of posed portraits.

Figure 1.8
This is a classic studio portrait. Window light and reflectors were used to light this image. It is a posed portrait but still has a soft, casual feel to it.

Figure 1.9
Using the waterfalls as the background, I created this formal portrait using the rock as a posing prop and to create different heights between the subjects.

Figure 1.10
This is a great example of an extended family portrait in the park with members posed formally.

Figure 1.11
Even though this is a formal portrait, it still has a relaxed and natural look. Having the kids leaning in and everyone's arms around other family members help make this image look relaxed and natural.

Figure 1.12
Using the client's home as the background for this family portrait makes it personal to the family.

Figure 1.13
Having families go barefoot is a fun way to make formal portraits look more casual and relaxed.

Choose the Right Equipment

With all the choices out in the market today, it can be difficult to figure out what exactly you need to get started as a portrait photographer. I can tell you this — start with what you have and don't become a gear geek. I know it's easy to do because we photographers generally like our shiny new cameras and lenses. Don't be discouraged because you feel like you are working with less than the "very best." As a young and broke photographer, I started off with inexpensive camera gear and as I could afford better equipment, I upgraded a little at a time.

Cameras

A good digital single lens reflex (dSLR) camera is essential. I do not recommend point-and-shoot cameras for portrait work. A camera that can use different lenses, has good resolution, and has good low-light capabilities is a must. I suggest purchasing the best you can afford at the time.

Generally, camera choice comes down to personal preference and the type of photography you do. For example, I prefer a different camera when I photograph weddings than I do when I create portraits. (When shooting weddings, I am more concerned with frames per second than I am with megapixels; however, for portrait work, I am more concerned with image quality than frames per second.) I'm also hard on my equipment so I tend to like heavier camera bodies.

Canon cameras have always been my first choice. I started out using Canon cameras and have continued to use them over the last 25 years. Currently the Canon EOS 5D Mark II is my primary portrait camera (Figure 1.14). Almost every image you see in these pages was shot with the 5D Mark II. The new 5D Mark III will have hit the market by the time this book is published and I am looking forward to the upgrade.

Figure 1.14
One of the reasons I love this camera is because of its low-light capabilities. Most of my portraits are shot at ISO800 and I am able to make beautiful, large prints at that

If you are thinking about getting a new camera and you are not sure which one is right for you, check out rental companies. You can rent equipment and try out different cameras and lenses to see what you like. Check out which cameras feel comfortable in
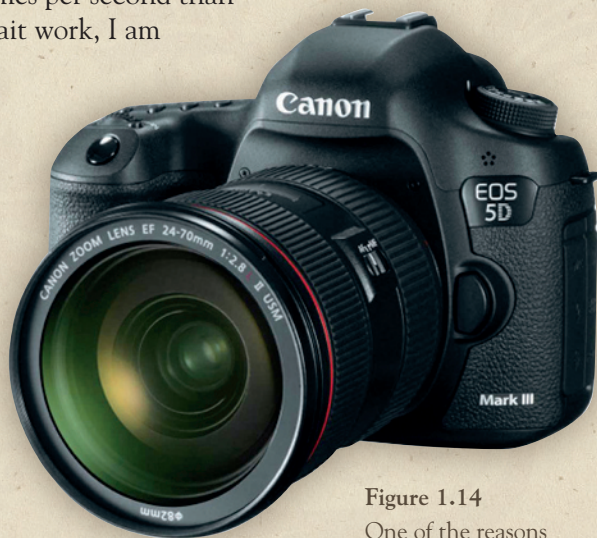
your hands and how you like the images you get from them. Functionality is also important. How easy is it to change settings? Do you like the white balance results from one camera over another? Buy the best that you can afford. Professional-level equipment is important because the results will be better, especially when it comes to lenses.

Lenses

Many years ago, when I first began to purchase equipment, I didn't understand the differences in lenses and why "professional" lenses were so much more expensive than the amateur lenses were. That was until I tried one.

My first big lens purchase was the Canon 85mm f/1.2 lens. It cost a lot of money at the time, and I actually ended up buying a used one and it served me well for many years. I had previously owned an 85mm f/1.8 lens and could not understand for the life of me why the price difference was close to $1,800. How much better could a f/1.2 be over a f/1.8? It was night and day. I quickly renamed my 85mm f/1.2 my "magic" lens. With this lens I could create beautiful portraits in low light with no problems and the images were incredibly sharp.

I strongly suggest that you invest in good lenses. There is a reason for major price differences in lenses. In general, the higher the price of the lens, the better the quality. Faster, sharper lenses are going to be on the high end of the pricing spectrum. Lenses that are f/2.8, f/1.8, f/1.2, and even f/1.0 are considered fast lenses because the larger the aperture, the faster the shutter speed.

Telephoto lenses that maintain a large aperture all the way through are going to be more expensive as well. Some telephoto lenses might be f/3.5 at their widest, but might be f/5.6 at their longest. One of my most-often used and favorite lenses for portraiture is the Canon 70-200mm f/2.8 IS II because it is f/2.8 from 70 to 200mm.

Work your way up with lenses; they will outlast your cameras. I have probably upgraded my camera body four or five times and kept the same lenses. In every two years there will probably be a new, upgraded camera, but good lenses outlast camera upgrades. The lenses I recommend for portrait photography are the Canon 70-200mm f/2.8 IS II and the Canon 85mm f/1.2 II, and for fun the Canon 135mm f/2.0. The 135mm is not a necessary lens, but because it is a prime lens with a wide open aperture of 2.0 it is incredibly sharp and a stunning portrait lens. The 70-200mm will give you more range but there is something special about prime lenses.

What About Wide-Angle Lenses?

Wide-angle lenses are generally not recommended for portrait photography; it's a mistake to think that because you are photographing a large group, you need a wide-angle lens. If you have the room to use a longer lens rather than a wide-angle lens, use a longer lens. Wide-angle lenses are not kind to the body and can often distort people, especially those closest to the edge of the frame. Longer lenses create a compression that is much better for portraits. Stick to using your wide-angle lenses for landscapes.

Tripods

If you have not used a tripod for photographing portraits, you might want to give it a try. It will be awkward at first but once you get used to it, you may wonder why you lived without one as long as you did.

A good lightweight tripod with legs that are easy to lengthen and shorten is a good option. You will need to try out different tripods to see which one works well for you. It's probably best to shop at a local retailer so that you can play with different models in person rather than shop for one online and try to guess which tripod will work for you.

Posing Props

I have had a set of Hanson Fong's EZ-Steps posing blocks (http://hansonfong.smugmug.com) for more than 15 years and they are still going strong. They are a great posing tool as well as a shooting tool (Figure 1.15). I can seat and arrange subjects on them, remove individual blocks to change certain subjects' heights, or use them as cushions for the knees for those people kneeling on the ground. I also stand on them to gain height when photographing close-ups. They are high-density Styrofoam and light to carry around. (Much lighter than step ladders.)

Figure 1.15
In addition to rocks, chairs, and stairs, I consistently use Hanson Fong's EZ-Steps to help me pose subjects.

Chairs are also great posing props. Multiple armchairs are great for posing large groups. I often use an armless chair when posing groups. Using chairs, blocks, the ground, or partial walls are a great way to create different heights between your subjects.

Camera Bags

A camera bag can either weigh you down or make your life easier. When I travel, I use a large camera bag with wheels, which makes it much easier to get around airports. When I shoot locally, I like a bag that is light and easy to wear so I can get

to all of my lenses, compact flash cards, and ExpoDisc easily. UNDFIND (www.undfind. com) makes an amazing and easy-to-carry camera bag system. I use both the large-size bag as well as the waist shooter. The neoprene material keeps the bags light, and they are not bulky to carry. If you prefer a bag that is more like a purse and designed for women check out Kelly Moore camera bags (www.kellymoorebag.com). Her bags are both fashionable and function able. For traveling on airplanes I like a roller bag that will fit in the overhead compartment. Tamrac (www.tamrac.com) and Porter Case (portercase.com) make several great rolling cases.

Reflectors

Reflectors and translucent light panels are a great addition to your gear bag. My personal choice is a 5-in-1 reflector system. Stand-up reflectors are also great but they can be a bit more difficult to handle outdoors. If there is any type of breeze, your standing reflector will take off like a kite unless the stand is weighted down. If you want to use handheld reflectors and translucent light panels, I highly recommend having an assistant along for the session.

Photoflex (www.photoflex.com) makes several 5-in-1 reflectors. They fold into themselves and are easy to carry. I often use the translucent center panel if my subject is in direct harsh light and I want to soften the light. The white side is great for adding subtle light to a subject who may be shaded when you have a strong light source hitting the white. The silver side is really great at kicking highlights into the subject's eyes and can often add light to the subject when there is not a strong directional light. The gold side of the 5-in-1 adds warmth and is beautiful on dark-toned skin. Depending on the brand and which type you purchase, some 5-in-1 reflectors have a gold/silver combo side. This is nice for portraits because it adds a little bit of warmth without adding too much gold.

Summary

Are you a formal portrait or a lifestyle candid photographer? Maybe you like both styles and will incorporate each one into your business. Have fun experimenting with styles of photography. Keep in mind that not all candid-looking images are actually candid. There is still some staging and directing involved when creating candid images. Without thought and planning your candid images may look more like snapshots. In addition, formal portraits don't always need to look stiff or unnatural; even formal portraits can have a relaxing feeling when they are done correctly.

Your equipment should be an extension of your imagination. Equipment is the tool, not the artist. As the artist, you manipulate the tools to create what you visualize in your mind. Get to know your equipment so well that you don't have to think about how it works. Familiarize yourself with the camera's functions so using them becomes effortless, and know what your lenses will do at certain focal lengths and apertures. Read the manual, but practice using your gear every day. Now go have fun playing with different equipment and finding families to experiment with. Your own family maybe the most difficult to work with so finding friends might get you the experience you need.