

Whether you're an avid photographer or someone who rarely takes a photo, everyone wants great photos of their children. As a professional photographer, I'm regularly asked, 'What tips can you give me to take good photos of my kids?' and I often hear the comment, 'My kids are so hard to photograph'.

Strike a Pose, There's Nothing To It...

By Vicky Leon



Let me firstly say, taking photos of your own children is harder than taking photos of someone else's kids. Believe it or not, I find it hard photographing my own son. The reason for this is that your kids know you. There is nothing new and exciting about you standing there with a camera. They may not listen to you and are probably sick and tired or mum or dad saying 'look over here', 'smile'.

This doesn't mean you can't get great photos; it just means you need to plan the exercise a bit.

Here are some tips for taking photos of toddlers (*baby tips to follow*):

What to wear: Dress your child in classic, basic clothing. Avoid anything too fashionable (it may date) or with a 'busy' pattern that will detract from their face. Jeans and a T-shirt are always a safe option, or for girls, a nice basic shoestring dress.



Keep clothing basic and classic, like this little girl's top

Lighting: Avoid using the flash. Achieving natural, soft-looking photos with a flash is difficult and most kids hate it! Take your child outside in the shade or inside near a window. Avoid direct sunlight as it creates nasty shadows on their faces. If you're in the shade, look through the viewfinder/LCD screen and if you see sunny bits behind your child, this will make it harder for your camera to get a good exposure (making the photo too dark). Attempt total shade in the area or choose an overcast day (when you can shoot anywhere).



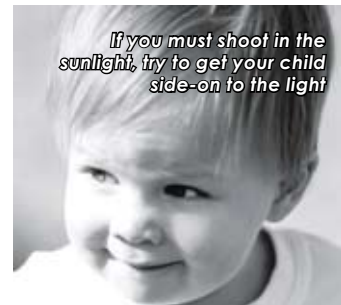
Use window light

Shooting in sunlight: If you have to shoot in the sun, place your child side-on to the light to create



The best place to shoot is in the shade

a nice shadow over half their face. With the sun behind them, you will need to use a flash (otherwise they will turn out too dark) and with the sun directly on their face, you will get shadows under their eyes and near their nose, and probably a squint.



If you must shoot in the sunlight, try to get your child side-on to the light

Posing: Take photos of your child doing something. For toddlers, try sitting them on the ground with their favourite toy. For older kids, sit them at a table to draw. Think of anything that will occupy them and keep them happy and in one spot.

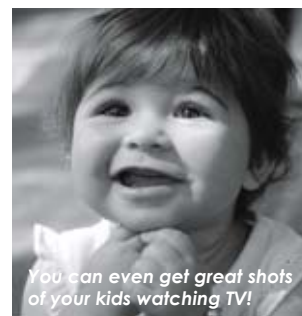
Get in close: One of the biggest mistakes in photography is that people don't get close enough. Your child is your main focus, so don't worry about everything around them. Get in close, focus on their eyes and capture their facial expressions.



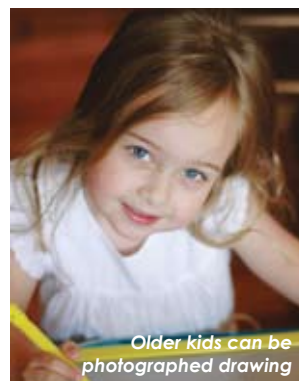
Get in close and capture your child's facial expression



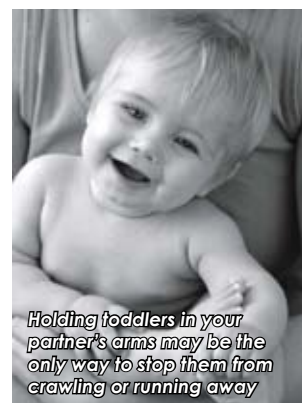
Keep toddlers occupied with their favourite toys



You can even get great shots of your kids watching TV!



Older kids can be photographed drawing



Holding toddlers in your partner's arms may be the only way to stop them from crawling or running away



Chat to them while shooting to try and get a smile



With your finger ready on the button, make a strange noise. As your child turns to look, take the shot.



Shoot from behind



Photos don't need to be technically perfect to be special. This is one of my favourite photos with my son

To look or not look at the camera:

Take photos of your child when they aren't looking at the camera so you can capture their concentration and interest in what they are doing. Once you have captured a few of these shots, talk to them about what they are doing while still looking through the viewfinder. Maybe say something funny to get a smile, still not worrying about them looking at the camera. Finally, while looking through the viewfinder and having your finger ready on the button, call their name or make a funny sound so they look up. When they do, quickly snap! This is the best way to get a natural look. If you can enlist the help of a partner or friend, have them dance around and do funny things behind your back so you can capture your child's reaction. Many times you are hoping for a smile or laugh but all you'll get is a curious look as your child is thinking 'what on earth is daddy doing?!' This is always a great shot anyway. After a while your child will get to know your tricks so you need to keep thinking of creative ways to get their attention.



Your child doesn't need to be looking at the camera to capture a beautiful shot

Have fun: Sometimes you can get caught up with trying to compose the best photo and you forget to have fun. As a photographer, I'll admit I have some great photos in my home; however some of my favourite ones are ones that are not photographically/technically correct! The reason I like them is that they have captured a moment. To date, two of my all time favourite photos of my son are one where I was laying on a beach towel in our tent at the beach and held the camera over us and took a non-perfectly composed photo of our faces. The other shot is the first time my son climbed onto our outdoor setting. I ran so fast to grab the camera to take the shot that it's totally out of focus, but captures this tiny little boy standing on this huge outdoor table (don't worry my husband was nearby to make sure he didn't fall). The point is that a photo can be great because it captures something meaningful to you. It doesn't always need to be technically correct.

Here are some tips for taking photos of newborns

I classify newborns as babies under 6 weeks old, however many of the following tips can be used with babies up to 12 months:



Lay on your stomach on the floor to shoot at their level

Different angles: In my photographic studies, I was always told to get down to the level of the child when taking their photo and to *never* shoot looking down on them. I have chosen to ignore this advice and shoot at every angle. Experiment and see what angles you like.

Safety: First and foremost, be safe. When photographing babies, it is easy to get caught up with the poses you'd like to take. Always, always focus on their safety and ensure whatever position you try that they are 100 per cent safe from falls or knocks.

What to wear: I recommend babies just wear a nappy. Some nude shots are always nice; however make sure you take the same shots in a nappy, so that when your baby is 21 they don't curse you for only having nude baby photos!

Lighting: The same principles apply as photographing older kids (read above), however with many of my tips below, even though you'll be shooting outside, you'd never know. Many of my shoots are done outside (even in winter) but looking at the photos, you'd never know.



Stand up and shoot downwards



Shoot from the side

Focus on their eyes: Always focus on your baby's eyes, even if you are photographing their whole body.

Lay them on their back on a black, blue or pink sheet: With your baby face up, stand at their head, steady your feet and lean over them. By standing at their head, they

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Standing at your baby's head,
lean over to take these shots

will hopefully look up at you. This opens their eyes and lifts their head for a beautiful, open posture. If your camera lens is wide enough, fill the lens with their whole body. Many babies will twist and turn, hold their feet or suck their toes – you can achieve beautiful photos with this position (yes, you are taking the photo

upside down but you can turn the photo around!) You can then move or zoom in a little to get shots from their waist up and then closer in to get their face. I have photographed babies as young as 5 days old in this position and you'd be amazed at the beautiful facial expressions you can capture.

Against your skin: Some of my favourite baby shots are of a baby placed against the bare skin of mum or dad. This gives perspective and creates a feeling of love and bonding.



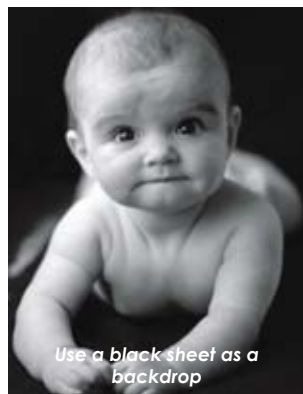
Skin-on-skin
shots with
mum or dad
are beautiful



Tummy time and sitting: As they get older, lay them on their tummy or put them in a sitting position, lie down on the floor in front of them and shoot away. To avoid clutter in the shot, lay them on a sheet and have someone hold up the end of it so it creates a wall behind your baby (or hang it over something). I use a black sheet as I feel it creates classic shots.



Simple shots where all you can see is baby
and mum or dad's arms works very well



Use a black sheet as a
backdrop

Hold them against a black backdrop: Hang a black sheet over a door and try some of these poses.

Breastfeeding photos:

Even if you don't think you want any, always take breastfeeding shots. Once you've stopped breastfeeding, these photos will be very special to you. I take a lot of photos of women breastfeeding and I feel it is a privilege to capture such a special experience.



Printing your photos: You've set up your shot, taken a beautiful photo and now you're looking at the image on your computer screen, you couldn't be happier! Your next step is to have it printed. What most people don't realise is that correct printing is **crucial** in achieving quality photographs; therefore where you choose to have your photos printed is very important. Unfortunately most home printers and the instant print machines in many stores produce prints that will fade more quickly, are more easily damaged and have poor colour and density reproduction. You need to find a lab that uses large photographic printing machines that are calibrated and maintained to a very high standard. The very best labs also have qualified staff who will individually correct each image for colour and density. This is not done at the mass merchandisers where your files are fed through machines with only an automatic overall correction. Ask your lab if they do individual corrections. (See my website for my recommendation of a lab you can use in Melbourne).

I hope some of these tips are helpful and will inspire you in your photographic journey with your children. And always remember the worst photos are those not taken!

In finishing, I'd like to share with you a quote I found from the movie *One Hour Photo* (not a great movie, but a great quote):

*And if these pictures have anything important to say to future generations, it's this:
I was here. I existed. I was young, I was happy, and someone cared enough about me in this world to take my picture.*

Happy shooting! ❖

Editor's note: I was going to title this story 'Honey, I Shot the Kids' or 'How to Shoot Your Kids' but thought some people might complain!

Vicky Leon is a Melbourne based photographer specialising in babies and young children and is a regular contributor of images to the ABA. Vicky comes to your home so your children can be photographed in familiar and meaningful surroundings. Vicky provides her clients with a CD of their images with full copyright for them to print their own photos.

For more information about Vicky's service and to see more example of her work, please visit her website www.photosbyvickyleon.com

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