

I'm Just a Mom With a Camera
Holidays fit for the King 2009
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Tips for taking better photographs--for cards or just for capturing the moment.

1. The Christmas Card Photo Session

Here are a some ideas to try in your next session.

Change your perspective.

- Get down low: lay down on the ground, put the camera on the ground...use remote/self timer
- Way way up: stand in a chair, counter top, table, ladder. By taking a picture from above your subject's eye level, it allows you to get more in the frame and it also adds a flattering effect to your subject.
- Tilt your camera at unusual angles
- Try to avoid taking pictures where your subject is looking down at you. This is not typically flattering.

Group shots: Ways to avoid the typical "line-up"

- Put subjects' heads together, get in tight on faces. Zoom in...chances are, your main interest is their faces.
- If you have a larger group, divide the group into smaller groups within the frame - few people sitting together, others standing together - spread out a bit and try to set a natural scene.
- Have everyone sit - maybe mom and dad centered, one child on a lap, another older child leaning back on mom - try turning subjects at slight angles to each other
- Can't get a good group shot? You can often make a collage of multiple pictures on one card - get three great shots of your kids individually and print them on a card that allows for three images!
- Your subject does not always need to be looking at you. What kind of mood are you trying to create? Have them purposely look away or look at each other if you are taking a group shot.

Frame the subject within the frame

- Use objects to frame your subject within the camera shot (i.e. have them hold up picture frame...Vogue it)

Do you see what "eye" see?

- For a stunning photo, make sure that you put your focal point on the eyes or the corner of the eye. When the eyes are in focus, it really makes a photo pop!
- Taking portraits from above your subject's level causes them to look up and open up their eyes. It also helps you to get some catch lights.

No queso, please!

- Avoid the fake smile. Have the subject giggle, talk or distract them to avoid the cheese.
- To avoid catching them while blinking, have subjects close their eyes and open them on the count of three. Then shoot a few quick pictures in a row on three. Try using the "burst mode" on your camera if you have it.
- If you feel like your subject is reluctant to having their picture taken, give them something to do: book, toy, crayons, etc. This will help them to relax and be more natural.

Props please!

- Introduce a fun prop to your session. Balloons, lollipops, pom poms, bubble gum, glasses, funny wigs. All of these can be used to add a fun element to your session.

What to wear/What not to wear

- Be comfortable. Kids in stiff, scratchy, hot, uncomfortable clothes do not often cooperate well for pictures!
- Try to avoid large blocks of color - ie: if everyone is wearing all white, you will have a large clump of white in the center of your picture. This may work well for a beach setting, but might not be great for winter.
- Mix it up - find coordinating solid colors and pay attention to what works well with your group's skin tone; one or two complementary patterns work well when mixed in with solids. It's ok to let your subjects' personalities shine through! And think about where you will be. Does your color scheme clash with your background?
- Accessories are fun! If you want everyone wearing matching colors, throw in a few accessories like a scarf, belt, cute shoes, cute bow/hairband, necklaces, vest, cardigan, etc.
- Think texture. Textures are great, especially for cool weather photos. Knitted scarves, hats and gloves can really add interest. Jeans are great and often have a nice texturized look when converted to black and white. Bark, leaves, wood benches, brick, etc. There's not a lot of greenery out there in the winter, but texture still photographs beautifully!

Do a background check

- Make sure you know what you're getting in the background. If you want a non-distracting background, hang a solid bed sheet or a few yards of a pretty fabric over a chair. Or try wrapping paper.
- Examine the scene in your viewfinder/LCD screen. Make sure things like trees and lamps aren't growing out of your subjects' heads!
- Remove any pictures or other distractions from walls if possible.
- If you decide to use a black background, pay attention to wardrobe. Black/navy shirts against a black background can create the floating head/hands effect.
- Experiment with backgrounds. It may be interesting to see what pops up! (ex. lighthouses, other tall structures)

Looking for ideas and inspiration?

- www.flickr.com (keywords: holiday portrait, holiday photo, Christmas portrait, children, child, family portrait, Christmas lights, Christmas tree, Christmas cards, etc.)
- www.iheartfaces.blogspot.com
- <http://thepioneerwoman.com/>

Where are some places to take pictures?

- Downtown areas make for really awesome backgrounds!
- Duke Gardens
- Homewood Nursery
- Raulston Arboretum
- Yates Mill
- Tree farm
- Your own yard!
- Your favorite park or playground

2. Make you list, and check it twice!

Before Thanksgiving, sit down and make a list of all of the important events that you would like to document over the holiday season. Sometimes you need to get in close to capture those details that make your celebrations unique to your family.

Some ideas:

Thanksgiving:

- Take pictures of your menu, recipes, and shopping list.
- If you are traveling, take pictures of things along the way.
- Activity in the kitchen: mixing, chopping, basting. Who is doing what? Try taking pictures of

food and food prep from above.

- Events of the day: watching football, looking at sales flyers for Black Friday (hint: stand just outside the group and take pictures quietly)
- Capture the quiet moments--Uncle Jimmy sleeping on the couch.
- What's the weather?
- Kids playing outside, jumping in the leaves.

Christmas:

- Decorating the tree. Don't just stop at the "total tree" picture. Get in close to see the hands putting the ornaments on. Take pictures of your favorite ones. What do you do to get ready for Christmas?
- Christmas treats. Take pictures of all of the goodies that you prepare and eat! If your kitchen has poor lighting, take that platter of sweets into another room!
- Christmas lights
- Wrapping presents, shopping, Christmas lists.

3. Be prepared.

- Keep your camera with you as much as possible. I normally keep my point and shoot in my purse and if I don't have that, I'm taking pictures with my phone.
- While the family group picture is always desirable, sometimes the greatest images are the ones that aren't "planned". Work silently. Snap away while your subject is playing or working on something.
- The benefit to always taking pictures? You get more practice, the more pictures you take increases the likelihood that you'll get "the shot" and your family will get used to (or maybe just annoyed by) your constant picture snapping!
- Make sure that your batteries are charged and you have all of your equipment ready (cables, extra cards, tripod, extra batteries) the night before a big event. You don't need any additional stress!

4. I saw the light.

- Lighting is probably the biggest part of better photography.
- Move the subject to a window...outside....garage...refrigerator (seriously! It is great light!)
- Don't place subjects directly in front of a window unless you want a silhouetted effect. Create nice effects by orienting your subject perpendicular to the light source, or else place yourself between the window and the subject. Pay attention to shadows - is your (the photographer) shadow visible in the picture?
- Best times of day are morning and evening before sunset. Mid-day/mid-afternoon sun is harsh and often unforgiving. Sunlight that is high in the sky will create harsh shadows on faces.

- "Open shade" is a great place to take pictures. Use a shadow of a building. I like to use the spot right in front of my garage door. The white color is a great reflector!
- If at ALL possible...turn OFF your flash. Either turn on some directional lighting or even a flashlight--bounce it off the ceiling--for additional lighting. Move the subject in front of a window.

5. Be Brave. Take the camera off Auto!

Your camera is a smart little thing. Most of the time, Auto is great, all purpose. But, if you've ever wondered...could this be better? The answer? Yes, with practice (see, there is the "take lots of pictures" advice!).

You don't have to jump immediately to full manual. You can try out all of those other settings on your camera!

- Portrait mode (face) - Will let you focus on your subject and blur the background. Get in close to your subject.
- Landscape mode (mountain) - Keeps as much of the scene in focus as possible.
- Sports mode (running man) - Helps you freeze the action of moving subjects (fast shutter)
- Night mode (person + star) - For taking pictures in low light situations; uses a slow shutter speed to let in as much light as possible. Tripod recommended for this mode (or just prop the camera on a table, stack of books, fence post, screw it into the finial screw on top of a lamp, etc). Moving subjects will probably appear blurred.
- Macro (flower)- Allows you to get up close and personal. Capture lots of small details.

Next steps:

- Aperture Priority (A or Av)- Allows you to select the aperture (depth of field/how much is in focus/blurred background). The camera will select the shutter speed based on the available light. *Rule of thumb: if you are taking a picture of a group of people, try setting your aperture to the # of people. The lower the aperture number, the more light that comes in. BUT--this also means that the area that is in focus is MUCH SMALLER. Be careful with this. It may be a perfect shot, but the eyes may be out of focus.
- Shutter Priority (S or Tv)- Allows you to select the shutter speed (the length of time the shutter is open: longer time=more light allowed in) while the camera chooses the aperture based on available light. You would use this if you wanted to emphasize motion.

Simple explanation for aperture and shutter speed: Think of it as if it were your eye. Aperture = your pupil. Shutter = your eyelid.

- When you're in a dark place with low light, your pupil gets wider to let in more light. When you are photographing a scene with low light, you need to open your camera's "pupil" (aperture) to let in more light. (Remember, large aperture = small number, like f2.8, f3.8, f4). When you're in a bright place, your pupil gets smaller to restrict the light. So the same holds true for your camera. Bright light generally calls for a small aperture (small aperture = large number, like f7.1, f8, f9...). Note - aperture also impacts how much of your scene will be in focus. With larger apertures (so small numbers), more and more of your subject will be out of focus.

This gives you that cool blurred background, called "bokeh" that everyone loves! But, you have to BE CAREFUL...especially when taking pictures of children with a low f/number. They tend to wiggle around a lot, so it is hard to keep them in that small area that is in focus. For children, I tend to use f/4 or f/4.5.

- The camera's shutter speed is essentially how fast your camera is blinking. Faster shutter speeds help you freeze or blur the action in your pictures. Shutter speed works in conjunction with the aperture setting. The slower the "blink," the more time your camera has to receive light through the aperture opening. So if you are using a fast shutter speed, you may need to have a larger aperture so that more light can be captured in a very short amount of time. On the other hand, a slow shutter speed may require a small aperture so too much light doesn't get in and "blow out" your picture (too bright and white).
- When you are using a slow shutter speed, you almost HAVE to use a tripod or a stable object. If you can hear the camera "click-click" you don't need to hand hold. Save yourself the heartache of a blurred image and use the tripod, prop on books, etc. My remote for my camera's self timer is the best \$15 I've spent!

Other thoughts:

Places to print cards:

www.snapfish.com

www.shutterfly.com

www.zazzle.com

www.vistaprint.com

You can also print at: Wal-Mart, Costco, Target, Walgreens, Wolf Camera, etc.

Many of these places offer collage options. If you know how to use Photoshop Elements, you can create your own card!

Bottom line, take lots of pictures. Have FUN while you are taking pictures. If you are stressed out and not having fun, that will reflect in your subjects. The key to getting better pictures is to keep taking pictures. Get together with your friends and talk about pictures. Try different techniques. Read blogs and books on photography. Take a class at a community center.

And, while you can take a fabulous picture, I do encourage you to hand the camera over from time to time. Have someone else take the picture and you go say "cheese!"

