



Richard McKnight

Photographing Kids



Wrap it up in 15 minutes

Most kids—and adults!—are bored with photography after about 15 minutes, even if you're very entertaining. Spend more than that and everyone will get frustrated, including the parents. The exception seems to be seventh grade girls who will mug for the camera all day long!

Take many shots

Toddlers will not pose for you and they are always in motion. If your camera has a continuous burst mode, use it. Digital is cheap, so shoot away! If you don't take 50 shots of a toddler in that 15 minutes, you aren't taking enough pictures!

No flash!

Flash and kids usually make for very ugly photos. Flash creates glare and harsh shadows. Every camera allows you to turn off the flash. Do so when photographing kids. The only exception is if you have an accessory flash unit that you can bounce off the ceiling. Even then, natural light is better.

Fill the frame

We love babies and little kids because they allow us to get close. And we want to because their skin is fine and they smell good. So get in close with your camera and fill the frame with their little faces—so close you can see the skin texture and almost smell those good smells. If they're drooling, so much the better! What about teenagers who are more standoffish? Use your telephoto!



Shoot inside close to windows

Window light is wonderful. It's a good way to take really professional-looking pictures without fancy lights. Position the kid with the window at his or her side and fire away. Try asking them to look out the window. The catch here is to make sure there is no direct sunlight streaming into the window. If you're really feeling exotic, have someone hold a white piece of cloth or even a newspaper on the side of the child opposite the window for a little fill light.



Shoot in open shade

Open shade is a large space outside that is, well, in the shade. The key words are “shade” and “large space,” like the side of a building that blocks the sun or in the shadow of a very large tree. This will eliminate bright sun on your subject’s face and harsh shadows under the eyes.

Be selective about the backgrounds

Try to take pictures in a place with a minimum of background clutter. If this is not possible and your camera allows, use a large aperture (or the Portrait setting if your camera has one) so the background goes out of focus.

Do NOT say, “Smile”!

Odd as it may sound, younger kids do not know how to smile for a portrait. Even barking, “Say cheese,” elicits a crooked or goofy smile most of the time. The pictures you want are natural: it’s not natural—at least for a kid—to smile on cue! So forget posing pictures and instead, catch kids in the act of being natural. Photograph toddlers while they’re distracted with a toy or photograph older kids while they’re playing with a pet or another child.

OK, kid-friendly posing is allowed



Here are some situations in which I have succeeded in getting good pictures while asking older kids to pose (5 and over. I have even gotten some toddlers to do some of these things.) But wait until the end of the photo session for all of this because it tends to get kids in motion and kids in motion are hard to photograph!

•**Peeking around stuff.** “Get behind that tree and peek out,” you might say. Or, “Pretend you’re spying on me from behind that slide there.”

•**Looking through stuff.** “Hey! See the hole in that sculpture? Go behind it and look out.” “See how that tree makes a kind of window? Go

look out that window.”

- **Upside down.** “Hang upside down from that swing.”
- **Leaping.** “Jump up and down like you just won a big prize!”
- **Look mad.** “Cross your arms and look like a real tough guy (or like you’re really mad)!” Or, “Pretend you just did something bad and you’re praying really hard for forgiveness.”
- **Soap bubbles.** An old photographer’s standby. Or bring a new (photogenic!) toy (vs. a distracting one).
- **Do this, do that.** “Run over there, and then run back and stand on this wall (by this statue, etc.)” This is a good way to get kids to be active and slow down for you. I have yet to see a kid who wouldn’t do this.



Use a low ISO—usually

ISO is the camera's sensitivity to light. A higher ISO means a grainier/noisier picture. So if you want to capture that beautiful skin, go for low ISO. Sometimes a grainy picture has character, however, and remember this rule: Get the picture no matter what you have to do. If setting a low ISO means every picture is blurry, set that ISO higher. Don't know what ISO is or how to set it? Read the manual!

Read the manual!

If you really want to take good pictures of kids, you have to know how your camera works. If you work at it a bit and use your camera as a tool, your pictures will be stunning. Think about it: there is no more beautiful subject matter than kids. But if you don't know how to blur the background or how to turn that flash off, your pictures will be no better than ordinary.



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