

Photographing Families

Tips for Capturing Timeless Images



Michele Celentano



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About the Author

Michele Celentano is an accomplished wedding and family portrait photographer with more than 25 years of experience. Michele is one of an elite group of fifty photographers contracted by Canon USA to be a spokesperson for the company's Explorers of Light program. She also was awarded a Photographic Craftsmen degree from the Professional Photographers of America and the Accolade of Photographic Mastery from Wedding and Portrait Photographers International. Her artwork has been published in photography magazines such as *Rangefinder*, *American Photo*, *Shutterbug*, and *Studio Photography*. In addition to running her portrait business full time, Michele conducts seminars, workshops, and lectures on professional photography in the United States and abroad. Visit her web site at www.michelecelentano.com to learn more about her seminars and workshops as well as to view her beautiful images.

Michele a native New Yorker and currently resides in Arizona with her husband Paul and between them three daughters.

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"To attain you must aspire." Those are the words my grandfather wrote in my grade school yearbook. I remember asking him at the age of 12 what that meant. He smiled and told me to look the words up in the dictionary. "If you are going to be a gravedigger you be the best gravedigger there is." Those were my mother's words. I skipped the grave-digging job and picked up a camera with a will to aspire. Anything is possible! I know this because I have made a 25-year career from what some thought would turn out to be an expensive hobby.

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Growth is only possible when positive people who help you reach your true potential surround you. Such people have more than blessed me throughout my life.



*This book is dedicated to my daughter Anna.
You are the most beautiful gift I have ever received.
Thank you for being incredibly supportive during
this process. Every time you put your hand on
my shoulder and said, "Mom you can do this,"
you reminded me that anything is possible.*

*I will forever be grateful
for your love and support.*





Contents

About the Author.....	3
Acknowledgments.....	5
Dedication	7
Foreword	13
Introduction	15



Chapter 1: Getting Started with Family Portraits	1
Determine Your Portrait Style	2
Lifestyle/Candid Portraits.....	2
Posed Portraits	8
Choose the Right Equipment	12
Cameras	12
Lenses	13
Tripods	14
Posing Props	14
Camera Bags	14
Reflectors	15
Summary	15



Chapter 2: The Elements of Photography	17
The Rule of Thirds	18
Leading Lines	20
Space	22
Shapes	22
Texture and Depth	24
Color	27
Impact or Emotion	28
Summary	29



Chapter 3: Getting It Right in the Camera	31
Understanding Camera Metering and Exposure.....	32
‘P’ Mode is Not for Professional	32
Middle or 18% Gray.....	32
Exposure Compensation.....	34
Exposure Compensation in Practice.....	36
Understanding Program Modes	39

Depth of Field.....	41
What Is ISO?.....	42
Setting White Balance	42
Custom White Balance	44
Cropping in the Camera.....	45
Summary	46



Chapter 4: Finding the Best Locations.....	49
Finding the Perfect Light	50
Sweet Light/Twilight	50
Open Shade	51
Window Light.....	53
Window Light with Reflectors	55
Choosing Locations.....	56
Skating Rink.....	56
Rocks, Trees, and Fountain Grass.....	58
Crossing the Bridge.....	61
The Walkway	62
A Wide Walkway	64
The Wall.....	67
The Retaining Wall	68
The Not-So-Perfect Park	69
The Church Archways.....	70
Fountain Grass	71
A Secret Sweet Spot.....	74
Doorways.....	77
Summary	77



Chapter 5: Understanding Your Client	79
Working with Children.....	80
Children Ages 18 Months to 3 Years	84
Children Ages 5 to 10 Years.....	86
Children Ages 11 to 14 Years.....	86
Calming Nervous Moms	90
Warming Up Reluctant Dads	91
Working with Blended Families	92
Working with Large Family Groups	99

Adding the Family Dog	102
Working with Elderly Subjects	106
Summary	107



Chapter 6: The Art of Posing	109
Walk Like You Are Wearing Versace	110
The Three Languages of Posing	111
Body Language	111
Verbal Language	113
Sign Language	113
Are You Hiding Behind Your Camera?	117
Understanding Correct Camera Height	118
Looking at Facial Angles	121
Posing Groups	124
Focal Plane	125
Creating Triangles	125
Diagonal Lines	131
Building Groups	134
Common Mistakes	138
Summary	141



Chapter 7: Building a Profitable Family Portrait Business	143
Creating a Business Plan	144
Image Branding	145
Marketing: Getting Your Name Out There	147
Websites, Blogs, and Social Media	148
Silent Auctions	149
Local Business Displays	149
Client Appreciation Parties	150
Local Business Groups	150
Infomercial Tactics	150
Figuring Out Your Cost of Goods	151
Pricing for Profit	153
Selling Packages or A la Carte	154
Using a Portrait Agreement	156
Studio Management Software	160
Summary	161



Chapter 8: Selling Your Portraits	163
Conducting the Pre-Portrait Consultation	164
Know How to Handle Objections	164
Show What You Want to Sell	166
Create Effective Slide Shows	168
Ask the Right Questions	168
Presenting the Images	169
Projection Slide Shows	169
Less Is More	170
Presentation Software	170
Managing Indecisive Clients	174
In-Home Consultation	174
Using Social Media	176
Summary	177



Chapter 9: Postproduction	179
Essential Postproduction Software	180
Postproduction Workflow	181
Organize Your Images	181
Select Your Favorite Images	183
Prep Your Images	184
Add Presets and Actions	185
Export Your Images	188
Add Skin Softness	188
Retouching	190
Designing Albums	197
Summary	198



Chapter 10: All Wrapped Up	201
Packaging Considerations	202
In-Home Delivery	206
Framing	206
Customer Service	206
Summary	207

Appendix A: Four Generations of a Family	209
Index	231

Foreword

When I first met Michele Celentano some 20 years ago, I was instantly impressed by her bubbly personality and her “I can do this” attitude. Over the years, I have had the wonderful opportunity to observe her evolvment as a professional photographer. When I saw her at the Professional Photographers of America National Convention as the keynote speaker, she wowed the audience with her exceptional photographic techniques. She did not speak at her audience, but most important, she spoke to the level of her audience on the principles of making her subjects look photographically timeless.

This book shows Michele’s techniques on why and how her techniques work and it also shows and explains specific techniques that cannot justify acceptable photographic moments.

I personally enjoy her key phrases when posing her subjects. Why I like these phrases is because you are interacting with the subjects. You are creating a mutual working relationship by putting the subjects at ease, thereby capturing their natural expressions.

The key phrases also assist the subjects to pose naturally rather than appear looking “posed” in the photographs. The purpose to these key phrases is that the photographer is the director, i.e., a director directing the movie. The director, aka, photographer, leads the subject(s) into the proper pose, etc. Subjects always want to be led by a leader; Michele is the ideal photographic leader! A toast to you, Michele!

Hanson Fong

Master Photographer Photographic Craftsman





Introduction

family | 'fam(ə)lē |

noun (plural families)

1. a group consisting of two parents and their children living together as a unit.
 - a group of people related to one another by blood or marriage: friends and family can provide support.
 - the children of a person or couple being discussed: she has the sole responsibility for a large family.
 - a person or people related to one and so to be treated with a special loyalty or intimacy: I could not turn him away, for he was family.

portrait | 'pôrtret, - ,trāt |

noun

1. a painting, drawing, photograph, or engraving of a person, especially one depicting only the face or head and shoulders.
 - a representation or impression of someone or something in language or on film or television.

Blending these definitions, a family portrait is a representation or impression of people related to one another who are to be treated with a special loyalty or intimacy. They are a historical view of our families — a representation of a time in the history of our parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents. They are the visual aid we use to help us tell our children stories about their family. Family portraits are important — maybe not as much for today than for the future, for the generations that will outlast us; the family portraits that help tell our story are really just the beginning of their story.

I was only 17 when my interest in photography began. To be honest, I failed photography in high school because I spent a fair amount of time cutting class to hang out with my boyfriend. You can imagine my mother's shock when I asked to attend photography school at the Center for Media Arts in New York City. My mother's exact words were, "How is she going to make a living taking pictures?"

My personal journey into family portraits started a long time ago, while I was aspiring to be a wedding photographer. It never dawned on me that being a wedding photographer meant that I was also a family photographer. I suppose this is where I began to learn about family dynamics and how to navigate family relationships.

I was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, by my grandparents and my mother. I was an only child and spent most of my time with my grandparents because my mom worked full time. Nanny and Pop were old-school Italians and my grandmother was the oldest of nine children. In my house, family was everything. Sunday dinner was not negotiable, and blood was always thicker than water. There is no doubt in my mind that my upbringing has given me a strong appreciation for the meaning of family and family portraits. I truly believe with every fiber of my being that the portraits of those we love are the treasured, tangible items we hold closest to our hearts when they are gone.

The portrait of my grandfather and his family shown in Figure 1 is 99 years old. I love it because it represents my grandfather's generation, and it is a small window that allows me to see him as a child. A 99-year-old photograph is still important, relevant, and timeless. This is what I hope I am creating with my work. Someday when I am gone and the children in the portraits I created have grandchildren of their own, they too will hold a piece of history — their own personal histories.

I started my photography career in New York. High-end weddings were my specialty and I loved photographing them. Italian and ethnic weddings were my favorite. The energy, the families yelling, the traffic, the huge churches, the ridiculously long limos, the over-the-top food, the women in the bathroom taking cash out of envelopes if they thought the wedding did not live up to expectations, the brides and grooms counting cash at the end of the night so they could pay the band that played



Figure 1

This is a portrait of my grandfather when he was three years old.

talents. I liked working with adults who could pay attention and stay where I put them. Sure enough, however, it happened — I began to photograph children and families and I enjoyed it. My years of wedding experience and speed was a great asset to photographing families with young children.

As my daughter grew older, I began to realize the importance of documenting family portraits. As a child we had lots of candid photos taken with a 110mm camera but we really didn't have professional family portraits. It was something I began to see great value in. It dawned on me that I had no real pictures with the grandparents

an hour of overtime because the party just wouldn't end. I loved it all! I loved it right up until my daughter was born and then suddenly the idea of being gone for 14 hours on the weekend wasn't appealing to me anymore.

When my daughter Anna was 16 months old we relocated to Arizona. Our new neighborhood was brand new and master planned for young family living. My plan was to rebuild my wedding business on a smaller scale and enjoy being a mom. Before long, neighbors and friends were suggesting that I photograph children and families. At first I was not all that thrilled with the idea. Patience with young children was a bit beyond my natural



Figure 2

This is a portrait of my family. From left to right: Anna, Michele, Paul, Alli, and Ashley.
(Portrait by Angela Carson)

who raised me, and that by being a portrait photographer, I am able to provide these important photographs for others. To this day when I photograph grandparents with their grandchildren I still get teary eyed. I always say to those children, "I know this isn't what you want to do today, but some day you will be so grateful you have these

portraits. They will mean more than you can imagine.” The kids usually look at me like I am nuts but I say it anyway.

Today, I live in Anthem, Arizona, and am married to amazing man who “gets” me and all of my quiriness. Figure 2 is a portrait of our family. I’m a wife, a mother, a stepmother, a runner, a yogi, and a bit of a gym rat. I continue to photograph families and children but mostly I love to teach photography to upcoming photographers. It really is an honor and a blessing to be able to give back to an industry that has given so much to me. Over the years I have been fortunate to earn my living by photographing people. (See, Mom — I told you it was possible!) Now more than ever photographers need education so that they can continue to produce quality work that will last for generations. I hope this book in some way will inspire and help educate photographers young and old on the beauty of creating timeless family portraits.

The 80/20 Rule

In my mind, to be a successful portrait photographer, it takes 80% personality and 20% technical knowledge. The technical stuff — cameras, settings, lenses, lighting — can all be learned. The personality part is where pros really shine. And you really have to like people — all kinds of people — from newborns to the elderly. If you are not a big fan of working with people, then you might be better suited for still life or product photography.

But being a great photographer is more than liking people; the people have to like you, too. You need to be able to instantly connect with people who you may have just met. You need to be able to direct people, take command of a crowd, and be assertive when needed. Confidence is a must. You need to be engaging and interested in your subjects. Asking a lot of questions is a great way for people to feel like you want to know more about them. The more you know your subjects and engage them in conversation, the more comfortable and relaxed they become.

If clients really like you and have a great experience, in most cases they will love the portraits you create for them. (That is, as long as they are not substandard quality, which is why you are reading this book.) On the flip side, I have seen wedding albums and family portraits that are done well but the client doesn’t like them because in the client’s words, “The photographer was a jerk.” If clients do not have a great experience, it will be reflected in how they feel about their final portraits.

Knowing the names of all your subjects is a sure way to gain instant respect. I always make it a priority to know the name of each person I am photographing no matter how big a group is. In the initial conversations with parents who are interested in family portraits, I spend a lot of time asking about the children: what are their hobbies, which movies do they like, who are their favorite characters, what sports

do they play, what is their favorite subject. The more I can talk to children about what they are interested in, the greater the likelihood I will get natural expressions from them. That is my ultimate goal — natural expressions! The last thing I want to see in a portrait is a “cheesy” smile.

As photographers, we love cameras and all the cool gadgets that go along with them; however, most people do not like to be in front of a camera. The camera and being photographed can be intimidating. Our first job as photographers is to get our clients to relax and feel comfortable. We have to establish a relationship with our subjects. It may be a short-lived 1-to-2 hour relationship but it is the key to creating fun, believable portraits that your client will love.

As you can see, connecting with your clients has absolutely nothing to do with technical knowledge. This is the 80% of what we do. Having a pleasant, confident personality and being able to connect with everyone in the family, from the 2-year-old to the 80-year-old, is critical to becoming a great family portrait photographer. Engaging your subjects in a way that brings natural, beautiful expressions has nothing to do with how to work a camera, which lens you use, postproduction work, or fancy filters. Great expressions from your subjects are simply a reflection of you. A smile without an expression is just a smile. Expression is what brings portraits to life; it's what tells the story of the subject. Have fun, enjoy your subjects, and make them laugh. If you can do that, you are 80% there!

What to Expect From This Book

Cameras, lenses, postproduction work, locations, and white balance are really only a small part of what goes into the images passionate photographers create. You can read this book and many more to learn about f-stops and shutter speeds, but my goal is to teach you how to make everyone in your images feel and look beautiful and enjoy the experience so much that they love the images you create for them and remember how much fun it was doing them, too.

Having portraits created should be fun for the whole family as well as the photographer, but, of course, the portraits also need to be done well. Be a perfectionist in your work and always strive to grow and learn as a professional, but remember as much as you love the camera, most people do not. It's your responsibility to make every person you photograph look her best. It's not enough to find a great location with beautiful light and then stick a subject there and hope for a “pretty picture.”

Throughout the chapters in this book, you will learn about posing subjects, camera settings, cropping images, postproduction workflow, how to find the best locations,

and techniques to make people look younger and thinner in the camera. My hope is that in these chapters you find inspiration and information mixed with some technical details, a touch of humor, and a lesson on the one thing that will make your photography incredibly special: you. You might just learn about yourself — what makes you special and why clients will come to you for their next family portrait.

People and the connections we have with those we love are what matter most in this world. I hope you find the joy and importance of capturing the essence of what family means throughout the chapters of this book. There is a great responsibility knowing the portraits you take will outlast you, outlast the people in them, and give generations down the line an idea of who their great-grandparents were.



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 the 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