

# Photographing Families

## Tips for Capturing Timeless Images



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John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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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](http://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.



Photo courtesy of David Guy Maynard.

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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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The list of photographers who have been influential in my life is too long for this paragraph; however, there are two who deserve special mention. Monte Zucker, you will always have a special place in my heart. The gifts you gave to me — I continuously work to pay them forward. I can still hear your laugh and smell the cologne that would linger long after your hugs. I know you watch over me from that perfect high key studio in heaven. Hanson Fong, I simply adore you and I am so proud to call you my friend. The greatest

compliment you gave me was, “This is the fifth time you are taking my class. Why? You don’t need me anymore.” You are the King and you will always be the King!

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And last but certainly not least, to my “chosen” family of amazing supportive friends, thank you for every word of encouragement. I heard every word and your love and good wishes were felt.

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.*

# 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 evolvement 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** |'pôtrət, - '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.

*\* Definitions from Oxford University Press online  
(<http://oxforddictionaries.com>).*

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 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 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 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.



**Figure 1**

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

Today, I live in Anthem, Arizona, and am married to amazing man who “gets” me and all of my quirkiness. 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.



**Figure 2**

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

### **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.





# **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 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 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. 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.



**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.