



Take Better Photos of the People You Love

without even using manual mode

Struggling to get great photos of your daily life despite having an expensive camera?

Here are twelve tips to dramatically improve your photos without ever turning that dial to manual.

Many of these will work with your cell phone or point-and-shoot camera too.

Section 1: Capture the Moment



1. Consider What Matters

Think about the moments that matter to you (and your family) and plan to capture them in advance.

Rituals - What are the things that your family always does together? What things do your kids do all the time? Try to capture those repeating moments and quirks, because one day, they'll stop happening. Examples: Sunday morning pancakes, decorating the Christmas tree, walking the dog.

Firsts - These are a little tougher, since you can't plan for many of them, but try to keep your camera charged and handy for things like your child's first steps.



2. Don't Force It

If your kids, or other subjects, are reluctant to be photographed, don't try to force them. Use these tips when dealing with a camera-shy subject.

Get involved - you're no photojournalist, so you can influence the action all you want. Play with kids, make conversation, crack jokes, etc. You're part of the story!

Back away - if you're getting a lot of resistance, just hang back and capture the story from afar until things warm up.

Wait for it - take a break and put the camera down if they're really grumpy. You might get lucky and catch a real moment later on.



3. Shoot Through the Moment

Learning to anticipate moments takes practice. When you're in learning mode, try to keep your camera ready all the time.

When you sense an interesting moment is about to happen, start shooting right away. Don't put your camera in burst mode to take hundreds of shots, but take a few of the lead up, more of the moment, and a few after. Sometimes the reaction is even better than the action.

While you're shooting the lead up, look through the viewfinder (or at the LCD) and try to find the best composition and light as you shoot. You'll catch everything and may end up with an even better photo than if you tried to photograph the moment alone.



4. Get in the Photo

Your family's story includes you and trust me, your kids are going to want to see photos of you when they grow up. Here are some ways to include yourself in your story.

Use the self-timer - learn to use the self-timer function on your camera. Set the camera on a table or tripod, set the camera to autofocus, and get into the photo.

Get a remote - you can buy a DSLR remote for pretty cheap these days. Hide the remote in your palm and trigger it every now and then to capture various moments.

Hand it off - teach your loved ones to use the camera too and let them shoot a bit. Or hire a pro to include everyone.

Section 2: Improve Composition



5. Get Down to Their Level

How familiar are you with the top of your kids' or pets' heads? I'm guessing the answer is "very".

Getting low and lining your camera up with your subject's eyes will put you closer to their perspective on the world. It's a whole different place down there! Plus, it'll give your images a view that people don't see often enough in their daily life.

This one's pretty simple to practice: crouch or sit down. And if your knees can't take it, some cameras have screens that tilt up so you can aim the camera straight at your subject and check out the LCD live view from above.



6. Clean Up the Frame with Angles

Is your house too messy to take great photos in? Spend your time practicing this technique instead of cleaning.

In the photo above, the beach was full of strangers and other random messy-looking things. To create a cleaner composition, I crouched down and angled my camera up a bit, which put the clutter behind the makeshift seesaw and family.

Pay attention to where your subject falls in the background and try to get at least their head into an open area, so they stand out.



7. Mix it Up

Change things up often to get a different perspective on the same moment. You might like the last one you try best, as I often do.

Distance - Get near, get far. Zoom with your legs. You'll find the look is different than if you just zoomed with your lens.

Lenses - Change/zoom your lens to a different focal length. It'll change your perspective, crop, and background blur.

Angles - Get high, get low, get level. Climb up on a chair or sit/lay on the ground. Higher angles are more flattering for adults, but low angles are fine if you're not too close.

Rotate - move around your subject for different lighting.

Section 3: Use Light



8. Avoid Mixed Lighting

Light has a colour, as you can see in the above photo. The wall is lit with window light and the bathroom lit with typical indoor lighting (tungsten or compact fluorescent). Outdoor light usually appears blue and indoor light appears yellow.

You can change the way your camera records light colour by changing the white balance. One thing this won't help with is mixed lighting, meaning when you have two different colours/types of light hitting the same subject. Mixed lighting tends to create weird colours and be unflattering.

One way to avoid mixed lighting is to turn off indoor lights and use window light only.



9. Use Window Light

As per the previous tip, turn off the lights and shoot with window light only. Window light can be very soft and flattering or it can be dramatic.

If the sun isn't shining directly through the window, the entire window creates a soft, even, glowy light, which is easy to work with and flattering to everyone.

If the sun is shining directly through the window, or the curtains are partly drawn, you can get a strong directional light, like above. Pay attention to how the shadows look on your subject.

If you shoot towards the window, watch for a hazy, low-contrast look. Correct this by stepping slightly to the side and rotating so the sun doesn't enter the lens directly.

Section 4: Get a Bit Techy



10. Switch the Dial to P Mode

Are there things that drive you crazy in auto mode or that you wish you had control over? P mode (program) is like auto, but better. Here's what's different:

Flash - you control whether the flash fires or not. If you want to use it, press the button beside it. If not, close the flash.

ISO - you can put ISO on auto or set it yourself to control how noisy/grainy your images are. Higher ISO = more noise.

Focal points - you get control over what's in focus.



11. Use Spot Metering

Does auto mode create silhouettes when you don't want them? Do highlights on people's skin go pure white and look ghostly? Change your focusing mode to spot metering (or center weighted if you don't have spot) to gain control over which areas are bright or dark.

In evaluative or matrix metering, your camera tries to make the entire scene an average brightness, so a large bright sky and small normal-toned subject will average out to make a mid-toned sky and dark subject.

Spot metering considers only the 1-5% of your frame around your focal point or center of the frame (check your manual to see which), so you can get a light reading off your subject and it will ignore the bright sky, like above.



12. Don't Fear the Noise

If you're getting into program or any of the non-auto modes, you may struggle with getting proper exposure (ie brightness) and avoiding a lot of noise/grain in dark settings.

The solution is... don't freak out! A bit of noise won't make your image bad. Missing the moment is far worse.

The other thing to be aware of is that it's better to have your ISO high and get the exposure right when shooting than to take a dark photo and make it brighter on the computer. The latter will create more noise and look worse overall.

And if the noise is too noticeable, make your image black and white. Black and white fixes many problems.

The #1 tip for getting better at photography: practice!

The more you shoot, the faster you'll improve.

The technical aspects will become more automatic and you'll be able to focus on the artistic side and capturing the moment.

Want to go beyond these tips?

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