

Street Shooting Your Children

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Maybe this is a growing trend brought on by the convenience and relative low cost of mainstream digital. Perhaps it has always been like this and I didn't start noticing until becoming a father. It doesn't matter. I'm tired of it. I'm sure you've seen it before. If you have children I can all but guarantee that you've done it before. I have. Really you need only go somewhere frequented by small children with their parents. Somewhere like the local park, where kids are enjoying new experiences and expressing themselves in a raw and natural way that only young children can. Seeing this, a parent suddenly exclaims "How cute!" and proceeds to stop their child for a photo, typically asking for a pose and smile in the process. Almost as bad are those that try and "script" or "stage" their child's actions and behavior for the purpose of creating photographic opportunities. While both of these practices will yield cute snapshots (if not a resentful child), neither will convey your child's personality or a sense of who they are. What follows are some of my ideas adapted from the genre of street photography that can be utilized or adapted into useful techniques for taking photos of your children. It is my hope that in doing so you will create unique images that are not only show how cute your child looks, but also reveal some of who your child is.

Translating Concepts of Street Photography

On the definition of street photography you may disagree with me if you like, but for the purposes of this article, these are the basic principles.

- The Decisive Moment. Timing is everything! Catching the right expression or gesture at the right moment can make the difference between a treasure and a throw-away. In fact, timing is paramount over all other photographic considerations, including composition. This requires that you develop a sense of prediction about what your child will do next...the ability to think "a couple moments" ahead of him or her. Honestly, this isn't as difficult as it may sound. Parents generally know their kids and what they are up to very well. To this day I still firmly believe that my mother does indeed have eyes in the back of her head. The "trick" is to match that parental sense with the ability to click the button when it happens. This brings us to the next point...
- Always Have a Camera With You! The best moments are not going to happen when you plan for it but during the normal daily routine. Murphy's Law. Always carrying a camera with you means that no matter when the moment occurs you're ready for it. With the size of small digital P&S cameras nowadays, this is a no-brainer.
- Unobtrusiveness. Record, but don't interfere. This isn't to say you need to pretend to be a ninja or hide from your child. It simply means don't let your picture-taking interfere with your child's activities.
- To quote Robert Cappa, "If your photos aren't good enough, you're not close enough." In other words, use "normal" focal lengths in close proximity. Using long focal lengths (i.e. "telephoto") from a distance renders images with a feeling of disconnect. Using focal lengths in the 28mm-65mm range (35mm equivalent) and from a more "personal" distance typically renders a more natural perspective of "being there".
- Unstaged. No direction from the photographer. None. This is probably the most difficult thing for a parent to do. I can't recall how many times I've thought "I wish they would just (*insert action here*)" when photographing my twins. Resist! The temptation is strong, but once you interfere that sense of spontaneity and naturalness is lost...and it will translate into the final image.

Interactions with the World

Your child is experiencing many things for the first time. As they mature so do their senses and their ability to conceptualize. This allows them many "first time" experiences with the same thing. As an example, just a few months ago my twins discovered that not only are flowers colorful but that they have a variety of smells, too. With every new experience comes an emotion and an expression based on that emotion. The stronger the expression the better it translates into the photograph. Small children are best at this as they have yet to learn how to effectively temper their emotions. Be there with your camera to capture the raw expression.

Not only is your child experiencing and interacting with the World, but the World is also interacting with your child. Your child doesn't always have to be the central focus of the photograph. Sometimes the expression or action of someone interacting with your child makes a more interesting subject or can tell us more about what's going on in the photo. Remember that strong expressions translate into a photo well? An odd trait that we adults have is that when we interact with small children we tend to exaggerate our gestures and facial expressions. The smaller the child is, the more we exaggerate. We do the same thing with our speech, too...

Conclusion

I know it's a little late in the article, but I remember now when I first noticed the "staged cuteness" trend. It was actually shortly before my kids were born. My mom sent me an album she had put together containing photographs of me from the point she and dad had brought me home from the adoption center (~6 months old) through the end of my teenage years. It goes without saying that going through the album was an emotional experience, especially with twins soon to arrive. All of the images touched me, but the ones I had the strongest reaction to were the ones that not only reminded me about how I looked or where I had visited, but also conveyed a sense of how I was.

Those are the kind of photographs I aspire to pass on to my children when they are on the cusp of becoming parents.

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