



# Envisioning Family

*A photographer's guide to making  
meaningful portraits of the modern family*

TAMARA LACKEY



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A Photographer's Guide to Making Meaningful Portraits  
of the Modern Family**

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*I dedicate this book to my very own family.*

*I love the promise of you.*

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# Acknowledgments

It would have been exceptionally difficult to write this book if it weren't for the culmination of all the portrait sessions I've photographed in the last near decade. For that privilege, I thank each and every one of my clients. I'm amazed at how much I've learned while staying focused on doing the work.

The experience of growing up as the only daughter, the middle child, in a family of five taught me much about how family shapes us. It may have taken me a while to understand it, but the connection of the pieces of my childhood to my resulting personality quirks certainly makes a great deal more sense to me now. Thank you brothers. Thank you mom. Thank you dad.

It turns out that we are consistently offered the opportunity to learn more about who we are and why we may feel alone at times, but it seems to very much be up to us to connect the dots.

What I've learned building out my own immediate family is a significant contributor to how I photograph families today, which is the cornerstone of this book. How each of us learns to care for each other—our sameness, our differences, our individual experiences inside the whole of family—is challenging, beautiful, and unending. I am so very grateful for Steve, Sophie, Caleb, and Ana Elisa. If each member of my family weren't so different, I wouldn't be able to understand such a wide variety of my subjects to the extent that I do. Living with people while making a living photographing people is like being surrounded by open textbooks at every turn.

The effort of producing this book was very certainly not mine alone. Thank you to our book designer, Kim Scott. Thank you to New Riders Press and my insightful editors, Nikki McDonald, Susan Rimerman, and Anne Marie Walker. I wrote this book while in the midst of a great deal of travel, contributing to it from at least ten different states and two different countries. My editors' abilities to keep things streamlined were extremely helpful in not just keeping me on track, but in keeping the overall structure of the book on track. Because I wrote in waves over the course of the year, this was not an easy task for anyone.

My studio manager, Sarah Coppola, was unquestionably a key player in converting text into clean formats and constantly reorganizing a multitude of photographs. In the midst of a rather intense year, I so appreciated knowing I could just hand off the words and images to her and she would take care of the rest. I also want to thank Kate Burgauer, my production associate, who offered me some excellent writing prompts one long summer morning when I remember feeling particularly stuck. Sometimes we just need a peek at what could be next to be able to start to get there.

And if it's possible to thank the act of running, I want to do that. There were more than a few occasions when I stared at a blinking cursor for far longer than I want to admit. Lacing up, zoning out to music, and moving relentlessly forward for a few miles seemed to consistently bring all the words back into my head. .

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# Introduction

We are all moving so fast in today's day and age. More information is coming at us than we can possibly process, and it's now flying at us faster and from more directions than we've ever known. That leaves us with this constant underlying feeling of *I must catch up*. That doesn't just apply to how much we need to process information; it also pertains to just how much we need to keep up with each other emotionally—most notably, with our families.

I believe that this is where family portraiture comes in. We know how important loved ones are to us. We know how much we'd miss them if for any reason we couldn't be with them anymore. And yet it's sometimes not until we're holding a beautifully photographed image of our entire family together that we stop and see what we really have.

I liken this to a realization I experienced rather recently. I found myself inside my home for a large part of the day working—working on this book, actually. I was up against a looming deadline, and I had to shut out everything around me to be able to truly focus and write thoughtfully. I was working from home to steer clear of our busy studio. For this reason, I didn't actually end up stepping outside until late in the afternoon. When I finally did, I was struck by the extraordinary quality of the weather. It was a perfectly balmy, sunny, early autumn North Carolina day with a light breeze passing through 75-degree weather. I stopped for a second, looked up at the cloudless blue sky, and thought to myself, "I missed *this* all day

long?” What I had missed out on was something strikingly beautiful. The truth was that because I had missed out on it didn’t mean that it hadn’t been there all along. It had been. I had just been so busy with how much I had to do that I hadn’t appreciated what was right in front of me—literally, right outside my front door.

I believe this is what we do for our clients when we present them with a meaningful portrait of their family. We give them the opportunity to look at themselves all together. A bona fide, true look at who they are and how they belong to each other to say, *I have been so busy, so preoccupied with the details of, but, look! Look at what’s been here all along! Look how we’ve grown, at what we’ve overcome, at how much we still have to look forward to as a family.*

## What You’ll Find in This Book

When you read through this book, you’ll find that it starts out a bit differently than how it continues and ends. The reason is that the first two chapters are more focused on family than photography. Specifically, the first chapter is centered on the history of what we consider family and the intriguing dynamics between family members—what family means to us and how it shapes who we become. The second chapter veers even further away from photography. It has to do with how family can be shaped, what it means to not have family, and how powerful photographs of family can be, especially after you’ve lost the people or the photographs.

This second chapter is the most personal section of a book I’ve ever written because much of it relates to how we built our family, which was in large part through adoption. Please don’t mistake this for a vanity chapter, because I found that the way I photographed families was greatly changed by the experiences of how we made up our family. I simply looked at the concept of family differently than I ever had before, and I knew better what to see when I was looking at families who had formed, no matter how they came to be who they were to each other today.

There are few things that improved my portrait photography more than the experiences I share in Chapter 2. It’s my sincere hope that you can look to

experiences in your own life as catalysts for furthering the depth of your own work as well. There's little else that guides us to better seeing what is significant to us than life-changing occurrences that force us to stop and reevaluate everything we thought we once knew.

If, however, that sounds like a bunch of soft gooeyness and you prefer to jump straight to the photography sections, by all means start with Chapter 3. (There's plenty of detailed information throughout this book, and you'll have more than enough to digest either way.) Chapter 3 kicks off the gear and technical section, which includes an overview of what's in a portrait photographer's bag, how to set up a working studio (Chapter 4), and considerations to ponder beyond the basics. Chapter 5 wraps up this section with a breakdown of many of the technical specifics you need to know to be able to better showcase your own artistic style.

Chapter 6 is a thoughtful yet detailed look at how to interact with your subjects, recognizing that empathy is one of the best tools we have when it comes to producing great portraits. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 continue with connection and specifics, and include precise overviews of how to photograph families in their home, in the studio, and in a variety of locations.

Closing with "The Aesthetics," I speak to the specific rules behind traditional posing and framing in Chapter 10, and how they can greatly impact the quality of the more expressive contemporary portrait. And ending with Chapter 11, "Lighting the Frame," includes diagrams, image reviews, and a general look at how to light your portraits well anywhere.

## A Personal Account of the Importance of Family Portraits

After spending a *considerable* amount of time with this book, it struck me that it might be interesting to ask a client of mine why it's important for her to seek out professional portraits of her family. So I asked a wife, mother, and now friend whose family I have photographed repeatedly over the last seven years to select one photograph of her family and tell me why it matters to her. What does she

see when she looks at it? And why are family portraits so significant to her that, in the midst of such a rich and busy life, she prioritizes them again and again?

These are her words and the reason I put so much effort into personalizing each portrait for my clients:

My family. It is the most important thing in my life. Enjoying my marriage and watching my children grow are the greatest gifts ever given to me. Because it all happens so fast, I treasure these photographs as glimpses of my life along this journey. I see joy and hope when I look at this particular family portrait (opposite).

My children live out their days full of joy, as only children can. On the face of my oldest son I see the joy of confidence of being loved and the belief that he can do anything and be good at it. On my daughter's face I see the joy of comfort of being held by the man she cherishes most in her life, her daddy. On the face of my youngest, I see the joy of energy, wanting to take on the world and always moving swiftly from one thing to the next. On the faces of myself and my husband I see the contentment that joy brings when we live life together as a family. We each married our best friend, and we still find joy in that all these years later. All that I see may change by our next family portrait. Life experiences and time have a way of stripping unbridled joy from our hearts. But at this moment, we know what it feels like to have it. And it will serve as a reminder to all of us that it is possible.

I will always choose to capture my family's moments through photography because these portraits are indelible reminders of a life lived well. They each tell a story about who we were and where we were headed, and that we were just having a great time living life.



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# Setting Up a Working Studio

*The beginning is the most  
important part of the work.*

—Plato

*The upside of controlling all of your light is that you always know what to expect.*

**A WORKING PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO** has a lot of camera gear, props, backdrops, media, supplies, stationery, computers, and storage options. It also typically has furniture—desks, chairs, and file cabinets—and of course a mechanism to show images from the shoot and an abundance of photographs! There are also lighting kits, reflectors, c-stands and stools, chairs, and benches. But a working studio is far more than just all the gear and accessories within it. It's a hotbed of creativity, a gallery of your work, a production studio, a meeting place, a sales center, and an office to manage your business. Studios can foster a creative environment, offer a welcoming ambience, and provide areas for people to relax when not on-camera or, even better, when viewing their photographs.

It doesn't matter if a studio is a designated space within your home, a stand-alone structure, or an area located within a commercial retail center. But there are several considerations to keep in mind when setting up a working studio.

## Shooting Spaces

Not all photography studios include a place to shoot sessions. Many photographers prefer to shoot on location as much as possible, so they don't include a shooting space in their studio. But they may still want a central location to meet with clients, do their editing, and manage day-to-day operations. Those who do want to include a shooting space should look at two significant factors when it comes to selecting and building out a shooting area: what type of light to maximize and what type of extraneous light to eliminate. If you are utilizing natural light in your studio, it's helpful to consider which direction the windows in your studio are facing. Determine if you will have to contend with a sharp morning sun or whether you can expect fairly even lighting throughout the day. You'll want to be able to manage the fluctuating light as it shifts during the day. In addition, you'll need to consider color balance issues if you are adding natural light to artificial light, because the color of light will also naturally shift as the sun shifts. It is cooler in the morning and grows much warmer near sunset.

If you are interested in eliminating natural light, you can either create a boxed-in room, where you control all light artificially, or you can invest in natural light diffusers, which can be as simple as black-out shades that are used when necessary. The upside of controlling all of your light is that you always know what to expect. The downside of controlling all of your light is that you may have to work harder to keep shaking things up from a creative perspective.



## Lighting Kits

Lighting kits will vary immensely, but most photographers choose to shoot primarily with either a strobe lighting setup or a continuous lighting setup. With a strobe lighting setup, photographers can trigger their lights to flash through a remote system, such as pocket wizards—or some other remote trigger source. When I first started shooting about ten years ago, I was still using a long cord that connected from my camera to my lighting system. I can tell you from experience, after many trips and falls, that it was quite a relief for me to move to a wireless system.

With a continuous lighting setup, what you see is what you get. You are able to light your subject, see with your naked eye how it looks, and then shoot it accordingly. You may lose a bit of power moving away from strobes, but you may be trading that in for the option to light more broadly and consistently.

Rachel Garrison

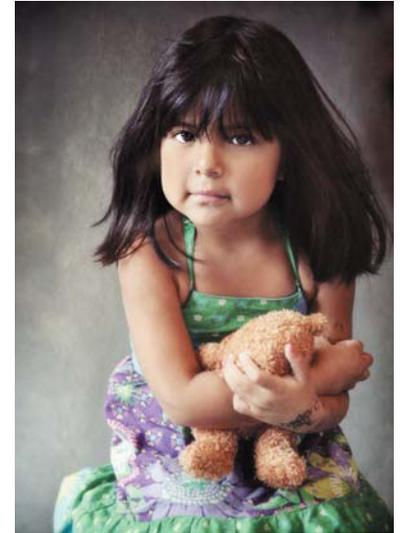


## Down Low or Up Top

Regardless of which types of lights you choose to use, you will need to determine where to place them. Lighting can take up a lot of space, especially if you have a multiple-light system, and most photographers will own at least three separate lights—a main light, a fill light, and a hair light. I'll talk more about that in Chapter 11, "Lighting the Frame."

If you use floor-based lights, you'll need light stands and possibly additional light modifiers, which take up room and can be easily knocked over. Every time you move a light, you may need to move sandbags as well—or whatever weighting system you use to secure your lights.

If you use ceiling-mounted lights, you'll have some flexibility in positioning them in an easier manner via a rail or scissor system. They also take up virtually no room in your studio, which allows for more open space to shoot and create. Although it sounds like a ceiling-mounted lighting kit is the way to go, you need to factor in cost, commitment, and restriction: Plan to spend more to set up and secure your lighting, and you may want to stay in your studio space for a while after spending that time, money, and effort. In addition, if you choose to use the same lights in a different location, for instance, it isn't as simple as grabbing your light and heading out the door.



## Backdrops and Options

A background for your shooting space is also vital. You may decide to use a certain wall or a combination of fabrics, muslin, drop cloths, or some such product. A seamless paper background can prove to be the most convenient option. Rolls of paper come in various sizes. The standard is 9 feet wide, but I tend to go with the 12-foot wide rolls so I can offer my subjects more breathing room when I'm shooting them in the studio. It's awfully difficult to photograph a large group comfortably on a 9-foot-wide background. Although the standard colors in seamless paper are white and black, modern colors have come a long way from the original powder blue or school-picture green, and new options are as stylish looking as they are ear-catching—with selections like plum, thistle, spice, and thunder.





You can mount the backdrops on the backdrop mount system of your choice. When I first started photographing portraits, I used a portable \$200 backdrop crossbar on a backdrop polls set. When my shooting schedule became steadier, I upgraded to a wall-mounted backdrop support system that cost a few hundred dollars more and utilized a chain pulley to roll my backdrops up and down. As business really became brisk—and I brought on associate photographers—I finally moved to a several thousand dollar ceiling-mount five-roller backdrop system with a remote switch box, which allowed me to adjust backdrops with the push of a button. There are plenty of ways to get started and many options to explore when time becomes more valuable than money.

## DID YOU KNOW?

### One of the World's First Photography Studios

Gaspard-Felix-Tournachon, otherwise known by his pseudonym, Nadar, is credited as creating and managing one of the first photography studios in history. Born in 1820 in Paris, Nadar was a caricaturist, writer, portrait and aerial photographer, and as the builder of a huge balloon named *Le Geant*, the inspiration for Jules Verne's *Five Weeks in a Balloon*.

Nadar opened one of the world's first portrait studios in Paris in 1854. Four stories high, he opened up his space to various artists and well-known figures of the time, the "Paris Intelligentsia." He also housed a variety of

exhibitions. Nadar practiced photography for only six years, but in that time focused on the psychological elements of portraiture. More interested in revealing the personalities of his subjects than simply capturing their likenesses, Nadar stated, "What is taught even less, is the immediate understanding of your subject—it's this immediate contact which can put you in sympathy with the sitter, helps you to sum them up, follow their normal attitudes, their ideas, according to their personality, and enables you to make not just a chancy, dreary cardboard copy typical of the merest hack in the darkroom, but a likeness of the most intimate and happy kind...."

Source: The J. Paul Getty Trust, The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

*Like a person's home, a studio can contain as much or as little as you choose to acquire and utilize.*

## The Look and Feel

The interior look of a studio can vary widely and should coincide with the branding of your photography services. If you are not exactly sure what that message is—the communication of who you are, what you offer, and how you do things—I suggest you start by creating a more neutral space with simple wall colorings, simple flooring, and simple décor. Then get more specific from there as you continue to better define your brand. It's infinitely easier to build on to a space in terms of design and offerings than to take away, peel back, and reconstruct a decidedly styled studio that doesn't really represent who you are or what you do.



Like a person's home, a studio can contain as much or as little as you choose to acquire and utilize. And, also like a person's home, it's not difficult to find that you have overstocked your studio, which results in a cluttered place that can frustrate you and stifle your creative energy. It is your decision as to how you prefer to stock the contents of your own working studio. In addition to what I've already mentioned, the next section provides some suggestions for the bare minimum necessities that can make the art of photography a more seamless practice.

## Additional Considerations

As you build your very specific space, the sky is the limit in terms of what it can contain. Here are just some of the many provisions you may want to consider.

### A Studio Sign

Being able to hang a shingle has been a source of pride for business owners, shopkeepers, and tradespeople for thousands of years. Having a clear sign that shows off your business enables you to better position your studio, drive more traffic to your location, and more quickly become a well-known brand to those who see it. Of course, you'll have to check on any zoning ordinances that may not allow for to post a sign, but if you are in a retail or commercially zoned space, be sure to take advantage of this marketing goodness.



### Backup Gear

When listing all the gear that goes into the camera bag, I didn't mention all the backup gear that lives in the studio. Strongly consider a little home for any extras you may need, not just backup cameras, lenses, and flashes, but also backup batteries, battery chargers, lighting gear, additional bulbs, lens caps, and so on. I've learned that everything tends to fail at some point. Like the best of people, even the highest-quality products can have issues at some point—and they do (the gear and the people). Get into the practice of stocking up on some backup supplies, and you'll be glad you did.

### Back Up the Backup

It may sound redundant, but backing up the backup is precisely the point. Ensure that you have a great system in place for backing up your images. Your backup system should consist of multiple levels of storing your photographs, including DVDs, external hard drives, and cloud-based storage options. These are just some of the many ways you can secure your work, making sure it is safe and sound.

*Get into the practice of stocking up on some backup supplies, and you'll be glad you did.*

## **Tripod**

Even if you do not choose to shoot with a tripod regularly, it can be critical to have one available to you when you need it. Even if you tend to rarely use one, you will be glad you have access to one the next time you are commissioned to photograph an extremely large family that prefers the photograph be taken indoors, for instance. This, of course, is extremely common when it comes to photographing family portraits at weddings. In that case, you will absolutely need to minimize any chance of camera shake.

Or you might want to try some creative shooting with light painting, for instance, when you use an extremely long shutter and light your subject in patterns to capture a different, unique, or interesting look.

Or you may want to take some steps toward offering video services to your clients, either as a separate service or as part of a fusion of still photographs and video clips. When shooting video, it can be significantly easier to mount your camera on a tripod. There are all kinds of reasons you might want to have quick access to a tripod, even if you don't use one regularly.





## Client Literature

In this only-becoming-more digital age, we tend to rely on technology to store, transfer, and showcase much if not all of our information. This is a wonderful thing when it comes to backing up our work, sharing our images, and creating galleries on websites. But when prospective clients walk through your door and ask about your services, it is remarkably refreshing to be able to hand them some sort of clear overview of what your studio is all about, what your pricing is like, what others are saying about working with you, and what type of work they can expect to receive when they book with you. Whether this is a detailed brochure, a cleanly formatted promotional card, or a tablet-driven presentation that you print out and give to them when you are finished is up to you and how you choose to present yourself. If you can also show them work that you've already displayed on your walls, albums to flip through, and a brief overview of your studio and how you like to shoot, you are much more likely to book them for a shoot than if you had told them to please just go to your website.

## Production Area

You will want a clean and ample space to work with your physical prints. Whether you are just unpacking prints from a lab or laying them out for packaging purposes, it's advantageous to have a designated workspace. You should also decide if you will offer framing services, and if so, if you will do them in-house or out-source your framing. There's a whole separate set of products and tools you will need at your disposal if you decide to offer framing as a studio-based service.



## Samples, Samples, Samples

The old adage “show it to sell it” does apply—to buy it, they need to see it first. The more you show your clients the physical products they have the opportunity to purchase from a shoot, the more likely they are to buy. This includes whatever you want to sell: canvas pieces, art boards, framed prints, collages, cards, albums. It bears repeating: Show them so you can sell them.

Props can come in handy as well. I don't actually shoot with a lot of props, but it may prove beneficial to at least have a few simple posing stools, chairs, background options, and toys to distract (or actually pose with) on hand. The sky is the limit here. I've seen studios stocked with whole rooms of props that include everything from clothing and hats to toys, stuffed animals, blankets, masks, branded little sets of products they've created, and so much more.

## Additional Supplies

Any working office needs some basic supplies in place for communicating with clients. Even if you strive to go paperless—an excellent green option that helps protect against clutter as well—you may still need a scanner, printer, and copier (hopefully all in one), and the rest of the core needs to simply be able to do business. The more every office supply has its place, the less likely it is to be overlooked when your stock is low.

## The Bottom Line

I could go on and on when it comes to considering everything a photographer might have in a studio. The bottom line is that you need to secure a working space that works for you and allows you to focus more on shooting and relating to your clients and less on having to manage one more cluttered environment.



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