

100% KID

ALLISON TYLER JONES

A PHOTOGRAPHER'S
GUIDE TO CAPTURING
KIDS IN A WHOLE
NEW LIGHT



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Peachpit Press
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*To my husband, Ivan, the kindest person I know,
with a sense of humor, who does laundry.
Best move I ever made.*

Acknowledgments

Writing a book is not unlike having a baby. All the fun takes place at conception and once the final product is placed in your hands. Everything in between stinks.

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The cure for boredom is curiosity.
There is no cure for curiosity. —Dorothy Parker

Introduction

A few years ago I stood in front of a group of incredibly talented photographers from all over the world. We were attending a workshop taught by two famous New York photographers whose work regularly appears in *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*, and in the windows of stores like The Gap. All the students were required to share ten of their favorite images with the group and instructors. In the middle of my presentation, Mr. *Vanity Fair* Photographer interrupted me and said, “Well, I have to hand it to you; I could *never* shoot kids.”

Those of us who have chosen to specialize in photographing kids may be a little bit crazy. If you have kids of your own, it makes sense that you’d want to have some photos of them. But what about those of us who like to photograph children who are not our own? We’ve made a career out of making crazy faces, rolling on the floor, and snorting like a pig just to elicit some expression from a grumpy toddler. Isn’t there an easier way to make a living?

Maybe we still haven’t grown up and just like to be with “our people.” Maybe it’s the trend in your area to be a child photographer, and why not? All you have to do is buy a *good* camera and Photoshop, right? Or perhaps you appreciate how surprising and magical it can be to spend time making images of young subjects who haven’t had a chance to develop their social mask yet—to capture the openness and wonder of being a kid.



ISO 100, 1/200 sec., f/11, 70-200 mm lens

This book is for those photographers who want to be better than they are right now. It's for photographers who have mastered the challenges of natural light and want to dip their toe into the scary world of studio lighting. It's also for photographers who were born curious and want to continually learn and improve their craft and how they relate to their subjects.

At last count there were roughly a zillion books on the market that explore the techniques of photography. Most of them illustrate those techniques with photos of leggy models, professional athletes, or grungy guitar players—all, presumably, well-behaved adults who can sit still and

take direction. I love those books and the techniques they share, but how am I supposed to light a toddler hyped up on sugar with a beauty dish? How the heck do you achieve a 3:1 lighting ratio when you can't even get the kid to stay in one place, let alone look at the camera? And it's not just the kids who present the challenge. I doubt that the leggy supermodel's mom is standing behind the photographer coaching her to "smile honey!"

So, rather than one more book full of general lighting tips and techniques, this book focuses specifically on lighting, photographing, and interacting with kids. The goal is to capture something real about that child.

You'll learn off-camera lighting techniques for both studio and location work, that you don't need a truck full of lights to create interesting portraits, and that much of the time just one light will do the trick.

You'll discover methods that will give you the confidence to deal with challenging kids *and* challenging parents—methods that I use every day in my photography studio to manage expectations and get the shot I want.

You'll learn my tried-and-true (and slightly weird) tricks for getting authentic expressions from my subjects, and you'll pick up practical tips on how to style, pose, and direct every shoot. Every technique and every tip in this book has been included with the sole purpose of arming you with the means to create beautifully lit, meaningful imagery of children.

What you won't find in this book are complicated diagrams and ratios. There's not a lot of math here. You'll also notice an astonishing lack of Photoshop instruction. Scott Kelby wrote the book(s) on Adobe Photoshop; go read them.

I wrote this book to encourage other brave souls who are on the path to the insanity and joy that is photographing children. I want to motivate you to channel the artist inside and re-envision how you approach the children you photograph. I want to inspire you to learn new techniques or refine those you already know. Push beyond the ordinary and the safe. In the process you'll make some big mistakes, but in the end you'll make your best images ever.

Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new.

—Albert Einstein

Lighting Gear

YOU ALWAYS SHOOT in natural light, you know how it works, where to look for the good light, and how to get the results you want. Isn't photographing kids hard enough without having to mess with even *more* gear? Learning to use flash can feel like trying to learn photography all over again. It's easy to get overwhelmed and quit before you discover the benefits that having complete control of your lighting gives you.

In this chapter, you'll get the rundown on how to use and how *not* to use your flash. You'll also explore the studio lights that photographers use the most and learn how to set up your camera and trigger those lights.





ISO 100, 1/200 sec., f/11, 24-70 mm lens

Light Is Your Medium

Let's compare the art of photography to the art of painting. A painter's medium is paint; the brush is a tool the painter uses to apply the medium. For a photographer, the camera and lenses are the tools, but light is the medium for expression. The word photography is derived from two Greek words that literally mean to write (graphy) with light (photo).

The type of light you choose to write with is a selection process, much like the painter choosing which paint to use. Your lighting "palette" might include the natural-light source of the sun, or a flash, such as a studio strobe or speedlight. It's as simple, and as complicated, as that.

Natural light is the gold standard of light. But nature is fickle and doesn't always cooperate when you need it to. Rain may threaten, and toddlers are usually in full meltdown during the "golden hour" of light just before sunset. Learning to use flash gives you the tools and the confidence to light any kid, anytime, anywhere.

A Word About Flash

Flash gets a bad name, mainly because of the less-than-stellar results of on-camera flash. On-camera flash is like using the headlights of your car to illuminate your subject. They will get the job done, but the result won't look good. Because all the light is coming from directly in front of your subject and the light is so close to the lens, the result is a harsh, flat, and sometimes red-eyed image that could be mistaken for a mug shot like the before photo in **FIGURE 4.1**.

If you love the look of depth and dimension in your portraits—the type of light that highlights the texture in the skin and hair of your subject—like the boy in **FIGURE 4.2**, get that flash off your camera.

Just getting your flash off your camera is no guarantee that the photo will look good. Everyone can agree that off-camera lighting can go horribly wrong; just take a look at your kid's most recent school photos or *any* photo taken by the big chain portrait studios located in a department

Get that flash off your camera.

FIGURE 4.1 Before: On-camera flash creates harsh background shadows and flattens out your subject (top right).

ISO 100, 1/200 sec.,
f/13, 70–200mm lens



FIGURE 4.2 After: An off-camera flash provides a dimensional light that enhances your subject (bottom right).

ISO 100, 1/200 sec.,
f/13, 70–200mm lens

store near you (which shall remain nameless, but you know which ones they are).

Those high-volume portrait studios have done nothing to further the art of portraiture. The trend of poorly lit photos of kids in matching outfits posed in a triangle on a mottled blue muslin backdrop deserves to fade away—forever.

However, just because someone did a bad job with the tools doesn't mean the tools are bad. It's not the tools but how they are used that makes the difference. The types of lights used to photograph all those scary kid photos are the very same lights that have created gorgeous editorial images in *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* magazines. These are the same lights used to photograph ads for companies you love, like The Gap and J. Crew.



Lights, Camera, Action

What follows is a brief introduction to the types of light sources typically used by portrait photographers in the studio and on location. In Chapter 5 you'll find an in-depth discussion of light modifiers and how to actually work with these lighting tools. For now, there are three decisions you need to make to begin working with flash:

- **Lights.** Select a light source.
- **Camera.** Set your camera to sync with the light.
- **Action.** Choose a method to trigger the flash from your camera.

Lights

The sheer number and variety of lighting choices on the market can be daunting, but you'll find that most portrait photographers use only one or two types of light sources: studio strobes or speedlights. Studio strobes come as either monolights or strobe pack systems. Speedlights are small flash units used mostly for location work.

Studio strobes

Studio strobes are powerful flash units that plug into an AC outlet in the wall. The term *strobe* refers to lighting units that use a flash of light to illuminate the subject. Flash and strobe are interchangeable terms. When you're shopping for strobe lighting, there are two main items to consider:

- **Strobe power.** The amount of light produced by the strobe unit, measured in watt seconds.
- **Recycle time.** How long it takes for the flash to recycle and be ready to shoot again.

Digital cameras are very light sensitive, so you don't need the most powerful lights on the market. But recycle time is a major issue if you are planning on capturing action shots of kids.

Monolights

Monolights are manufactured with the power pack and bulb housed in the same unit. Monolights are the most common form of lighting used by studio portrait photographers (FIGURE 4.3). The pros of working with monolights are:

- They are easy to use.
- They are more affordable than strobe pack systems.



- If one light goes down and you have a backup monolight, you can still keep shooting.
- Monolights come with continuous modeling lights, which allow you to visualize how the light will fall on your subject. Modeling lights also make it easier for your autofocus to lock onto your subject in a darkened studio.
- They are made to work with a wide range of light modifiers, such as softboxes, umbrellas, grids, and so on (see Chapter 5).
- Some monolights (like the Profoto D1 Air) come with dedicated radio controls that allow you to control your lights from a remote on your camera.

The cons of working with monolights are:

- Monolights are heavier than power pack heads because the power pack is built into the light. This can make it more difficult when you're using the light up high and overhead, especially with heavy modifiers like softboxes.
- Monolights don't pack as much power and can have slower recycle times than strobe pack systems.

FIGURE 4.3 Monolights are usually the most affordable type of strobe lighting you can buy.

ISO 100, 1/200 sec., f/18, 70–200mm lens

Strobe pack system

FIGURE 4.4 More expensive than monolights, power pack strobes pack more power. You may not need all that lighting power, but they come in handy when photographing kids because of their fast recycle times (below left).

ISO 100, 1/200 sec.,
f/18, 70–200mm lens

FIGURE 4.5 Speedlights are compact, lightweight, and ideally suited for location work (below right).

ISO 100, 1/200 sec.,
f/22, 70–200mm lens

A studio strobe pack system consists of lighting heads that are run from a separate power generator or “pack.” All the lighting controls are on the pack. Power packs are used by both portrait and commercial photographers (**FIGURE 4.4**). The pros of working with strobe pack systems are:

- The heads are lighter weight than monolights because the power pack is separate.
- Power packs tend to have more power and faster recycle times than monolights.
- You can run three or more heads off one power pack.
- The power pack is usually closer to the camera than a monolight, which makes adjusting the lights faster and easier.



- Like monolights, they are made to work with a wide range of modifiers.
- Like monolights, they come with modeling lights.

The cons of working with strobe pack systems are:

- If the power pack dies, you have no lights at all.
- They are more expensive than monolights.
- Cords from the head to the pack can restrict light placement.

Speedlights

Speedlights are dedicated flash units that can be used on the hot shoe of your camera or set up to use off-camera (**FIGURE 4.5**). Speedlights are manufactured to be used with your particular brand of camera and can work with your camera's metering system and program modes. They are most commonly used by portrait and wedding photographers on location. The pros of working with speedlights are:

- They are small and lightweight, perfect for location work.
- They are slightly more affordable than strobes.
- They can be used with the program modes in your camera.
- Tons of great new modifiers are available for this type of flash.
- They are battery powered, so there is no need for an AC outlet.

The cons of working with speedlights are:

- They are powered by batteries (so are not as powerful as strobes).
- They have slower recycle time than strobes.
- They require adapters to mount to a light stand.
- Speedlights do not have modeling lights.

So what do you buy? If you are primarily a location shooter, stick with speedlights or find a battery pack for your studio strobes. If you prefer to work in the studio, the monolight/strobe pack may be a better equipment decision for you. Start with what makes sense for how you work and add gear as your needs develop.

Note: Constant light sources don't flash; they are either on or off. These lights are commonly referred to as "hot lights" because they are usually tungsten or halogen bulbs that are very hot. With the development of daylight balance fluorescent bulbs and LED lights, which are "cold" constant sources, more photographers have switched to using these constant light sources. If you photograph newborns exclusively, a constant light source might be the way to go. No flashing lights to disturb baby, and the lower power allows you to work at wide apertures, ensuring the shallow depth of field that newborn photogs love. I shoot kids in motion, so for me, a constant light source doesn't have the power I need to freeze motion at low ISOs the way studio strobes or speedlights do.

Benefits of Lighting with Flash

Off-camera lighting in the form of studio strobe flash or speedlights puts powerful tools at your disposal. Here are just a few of the fringe benefits:

- **Predictable.** Once you dial in your light position and exposure you can lock down your camera settings, allowing you to spend more time relating to your subject and less time fiddling with your camera.
- **Controllable.** Using flash gives you the ultimate control over lighting in *any* situation. You can mix in existing, natural light or completely overpower the sun if that's the look you want.
- **Consistent.** When shooting in manual mode with flash, your exposure is consistent from shot to shot. Shooting with flash makes postproduction editing a breeze compared to the inconsistency of natural-light, location shooting, and this saves you time and money.
- **Repeatable.** Those happy mistakes are infinitely repeatable if you make note of your lighting setup and exposure controls. I often take a wide shot of my lighting setup to remind me of the setup later.
- **Not weather dependent.** Time of day and weather become irrelevant when you carry your light sources with you. Shoot whenever and wherever you want.
- **Portable.** We've all had those location shoots where the clients assure us that they have "great light" in their home, only to show up and find a dungeon. Rather than trying to *find* good light, bring good light with you.
- **Freeze-able.** OK, that's not a word, but flash allows you to freeze action like no other light source, and if you're photographing kids, freezing action is a very good thing.

Camera

My best advice on camera bodies is to buy the one that accommodates the way you actually shoot, not the camera you think you *should* buy. I learned this lesson the hard and expensive way when the Nikon D800 was released. It had been almost four years since I'd upgraded my camera, and when the D800 was announced as *the* camera for shooting in studio, I couldn't wait to get my hands on one. I promptly dropped the requisite four figures and began shooting. I hated it, immediately. What I had failed to realize was that although I *do* photograph kids in a studio, I don't shoot like a typical studio photographer. For instance, I don't shoot on a tripod.

I am constantly in motion and my subjects are rarely, if ever, still. I should have realized that a camera advertised as *the* studio camera means that it has lots of resolution and is great for still subjects. The camera produced gorgeous files with amazing detail, but the focusing system just couldn't run with me. So I put the D800 back in its box and, painfully, laid out another four figures for the Nikon D4. Why the D4? The D4 is the photojournalist's workhorse; it's made for capturing action anytime, anywhere in just about any light. Duh! The moral of this story is, buy the camera with features that facilitate *how you shoot*, not necessarily *where* you shoot with it.

Sync speed

Using any type of flash requires you to know your camera's *sync speed*. The sync speed is the fastest shutter speed at which the shutter is completely open when the flash fires. If you select a faster shutter speed than your sync speed, you'll notice a shading or dark black area on one side of the frame. The reason is that the shutter is opening and closing faster than the flash can fully illuminate the scene.

Nikon and Canon cameras list their sync speeds as 1/250 of a second, but that is when you are using one of their dedicated speedlights (i.e., a Nikon- or Canon-manufactured flash). If you are using studio strobe lighting, your sync speed for Nikon or Canon will be closer to 1/200 of a second.

Tip: To avoid buyer's remorse when it comes to cameras, try before you buy. Most major cities have equipment rental houses that will rent cameras and lenses. Or you can try an online rental source like www.borrowlenses.com. Rent a camera for a weekend and see if it fits the way you shoot. It's not free, but it's a lot less expensive than buying two cameras.

Manual

When using flash, I shoot in all manual mode all the time. I don't use any program modes through my camera, even when using a dedicated speedlight. Shooting in manual means my results are consistent from shot to shot, which saves me hours in postproduction time. Because every exposure in a given lighting setup will be the same, I can use the Sync tool in Lightroom to apply color or tonal correction to all of those images at once versus having to adjust each frame individually. Some photographers love the TTL (through the lens) metering features available through their cameras and can rock it like no other (I'm looking at you, Joe McNally). As for me and my studio, we'll be over here shooting in manual.

Action

You have the lights and the camera, now how do you make the lights flash? When you're shooting with flash units that are not attached to your camera, you'll need a way to trigger the lights. You have two ways to do that: Use a PC cord or a PocketWizard.

PC cord

For about \$20 you can get a cord that connects your camera directly to the light (**FIGURE 4.6**). PC cords are cheap and easy but are not recommended when you're photographing kids. It's always good to have one on hand for emergencies when your other gear goes down, but with kids running around, PC cords can be a tripping hazard. If you want to use a PC cord when you're first starting out, buy the longest cord possible and tape it down when you're shooting.

PocketWizards

The industry-standard radio transceivers, PocketWizards mount to the hot shoe of your camera and transmit wirelessly to trigger your flash (**FIGURE 4.7**). Most strobes come with built-in radio receivers that work with the PocketWizards. Other, older strobes and speedlights require you to have a second PocketWizard connected to the flash to receive the signal sent by the PocketWizard on your camera.

Start Somewhere

My first attempt at studio lighting involved a paint-covered set of garage lights. You know, the kind that will burn your house down when you're not looking? I wasn't a working photographer at the time and wanted to try out the whole studio lighting thing. I was shooting film so I knew the lights needed to be very bright to give me the exposure I needed, thus the high-beam garage lights. I used a white bedsheet in front of the lights to soften and diffuse the light, which seemed like a good idea until the smell of a smoking sheet alerted me to the fact that I had it a little too close to the lights.

It wasn't the safest lighting situation, but it solidified for me that perennial pearl of photographic wisdom, *light is light*.

Regardless of the source, be it sunlight or flash, light is the medium and our job is to manipulate that medium until we get a look that we like. In the end, it all comes down to one thing, *how does it look?*

Get a light—rent one, borrow one, buy one. Put it on a stand, set your camera's sync speed, and start experimenting with light. Make some really bad pictures and learn from those mistakes. *Start somewhere.*



FIGURE 4.6 A PC cord connects your camera to the light source (far left).
ISO 100, 1/320 sec.,
f/14, 70-200mm lens

FIGURE 4.7
A PocketWizard is a radio transceiver that triggers your flash wirelessly (left).
ISO 100, 1/320 sec.,
f/14, 70-200mm lens

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