

Picture this

Get the facts before commissioning a professional portrait

By Kimberly Ballard



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— Jennifer Tarkington, Jennifer & Company Photography

Having your child's portrait photographed professionally is becoming a rite of passage these days. The quality beats anything you'll get from your point-and-shoot camera, and the results are elegant, heirloom-quality portraits to display in your home for years to come.

Digital cameras and computer software have made it easier for a parent to take good photos. But local photographers point out that sometimes, to accurately capture a special time in your child's life, you just need more.

“There is still something to be said for experience,” says Jennifer Tarkington of Jennifer & Company Photography in Hampton Cove. Tarkington has shot portraits of children for more than 30 years. “There is no substitute for the artistic aspects of composing a portrait using professional lighting and a trained eye.”

A professional portrait session is an investment. So before you book that appointment, you'll have to make several decisions.

WHEN TO GO AND WHAT TO WEAR

“There is really no age limit for sitting a child for a portrait,” says Gil Brady of Gil Brady photography.

The most popular portrait ages for children are generally at three months, six months, nine months and one year old. New trends have opened up even more creative possibilities.

“Bringing in a newborn as young as 10 days is increasingly more popular,” says Tarkington. “There is nothing as fascinating as capturing a

sleeping newborn whose tiny head fits in the very palm of the mother's hands.”

Some parents may come to a photographer with an idea of exactly the kind of shots they want. If you're not sure, a professional photographer can talk about what kinds of clothing and toys work best.

“New moms should be open to dressing children in clothing that photographs well,” says Lew Campbell of Signature Studios in Huntsville, “and (to) using props that bring out the child's curiosity or affection for that toy, like a favorite doll or a book.”

Nearly all studios have a variety of backdrops and settings, but many also provide toys, props and even costumes and clothes. Take care, though, that the focus of the portrait remains on the child and her personality.

“There is a difference in trendy pictures and traditional heirloom portraits,” says Tarkington. “You want to shoot a timeless image that focuses on the child, not on the bright polka-dot dress.”

PORTRAITS ON A DIME

For parents on a budget, digital photography has also made children's portraits more affordable, according to a spokesperson for Portrait Innovations located in Valley Bend at Jones Farm.

“At Portrait Innovations, there is no sitting fee, no waiting for low resolution proofs to come back, and no waiting weeks for your final pictures to come in,” she says.

For parents who prefer to take this route for their children's portraits, convenience is key: customers walk in without an appointment, have their children sit for a portrait and im-



mediately view the proofs on a plasma screen. They then choose the pictures they want and print while they wait.

"Customers only pay for the pictures they choose," says the spokesperson. "Because there is no sitting fee, a parent can walk away and pay nothing if their child was crying, misbehaving, or they just don't like the results of the photo shoot."

Nationally-owned studios may not be quite as flexible in shoot locations and props as local independent photographers, but do offer many options to get the perfect shot.

Lifetouch is a company that owns portrait studios in JCPenney locations and Target Supercenters.

"Lifetouch has created an innovative concept called 'layering,'" says Deidre Hopkin, general manager of the JCPenney Portrait Center at Madison Square Mall. "Layering consists of building a story around the sitting. It can be a birthday party or favorite cartoon, sport or activity. We create a highly personalized theme that captures an event in the child's life."

SMILE AND SAY CHEESE

Getting a child to behave during a shoot can take time, but it doesn't have to turn into a nightmare ordeal. Professional photographers have experience comforting children who are too excited or unhappy to open up for the camera.

"Children don't have much control in their lives, but they are very intuitive," says Campbell. "In the portrait studio, a child can seize some control by not doing what they are told. I can get a child to do what I want by telling them not to do certain things."

For instance, 'Don't look at Mommy – look at the camera!' can produce a perfect candid shot of a child looking inquisitively at Mommy for confirmation.

"I simply do not give up," says Jennifer Culp of Legacy Portraits in Decatur. "I have been shooting children for 20 years and I have never shot one when I didn't eventually get what I wanted – which isn't always what they wanted!" she says, laughing.

In general, most photographers have a 'bag of tricks' they use to get a child to cooperate. Tarkington spends the first quarter hour of a session getting the kids relaxed so they barely even notice the camera.

"It takes a lot of patience, but you have to get down on their level and play with them," she says. "We have lots of toys and props like

tickly boas and bubbles, and we bake cookies and have a candy drawer."

And it isn't always about getting glamour shots. According to Hopkin, "Sometimes capturing a pouty look from a child or a succession of shots of their face brightening up after a good cry is natural and has an appeal of its own. We shoot for smiles but reactions to their environment are also important."

READY TO GET STARTED?

Studios like Portrait Innovations and JCPenney Portrait Center do not require an appointment, though appointments are welcome. For most local independent photographers, appointments are necessary. Time slots can get booked quickly, especially during peak times of the year.

Many photographers offer a pre-shoot counseling session, which can pave the way for the shoot to run as smoothly as possible.

"The benefit to a counseling session prior to the portrait sitting is to get an idea of what the parent wants; advise them on clothing and decide about backgrounds," says Campbell. "It can also get the child used to you so you are not a complete stranger."

Brady prefers a pre-shoot counseling session but if that is not possible, he takes a few minutes at the beginning of the sitting.

"The session is usually an hour and a half," he says. "This is time for the children to change into a couple of different outfits, get the child relaxed and busy doing something in front of the camera."

For parents who want the best of both worlds – a photographer's portraits and the family's own candid shots – some local photographers are happy to accommodate.

"I have a two-prong approach," says Campbell. "I will take the portraits and provide a CD, including the copyrights and

low-resolution versions for use on the Internet. Or, for a fee, a customer can take the pictures themselves, bring them in, and I will clean them up or touch them up using Adobe Photoshop, and provide them back on a disk."

North Alabama is full of photographers and studios to please a range of tastes and meet a variety of needs. A little homework is all it takes to capture a moment that will last long after your children have grown up.



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