



Peek-a-boo.
John Burroughs tries to coax a smile out of 3½-year-old Jacob Cozby.

DON'T ASK 'EM TO SMILE

Professional photographers use variety of tricks to capture child's expression

By Dennis Pollock
The Fresno Bee

Amateur photographers need not be embarrassed when they take pictures of creatures under 3 feet tall and get less than satisfactory results.

It happens to the best of them, to the pros, to people paid to take pictures of children.

In interviews, some of those professionals shared horror stories of their own and passed on a few trade secrets.

Their No. 1 bit of advice: Never ask the child to smile.

"The smile may seem the easy way, but it's not the natural expression," said Paul Kalinian of Paul's Photography, perhaps best known for his photographs of famed Fresno author William Saroyan.

Taking pictures of a curmudgeon like Saroyan has challenges not unlike capturing the essence of little Susie or Sean.

To take pictures of youngsters, Kalinian literally goes into hiding.

"I ask the mother to stand behind the camera," he explained. "Then I use a 20-foot cable release and hide myself behind a door into the darkroom so that I am invisible to the child. The child is never aware the photographer is taking the picture."

"When the mother is communicating with the child, you get the best photograph any photographer can take."

It doesn't always go smoothly.

"One time a mother came in with a child about 8 months old, barely able to sit by herself," he said. "I hid behind the door and waited for the [proper] expression. I waited 15 to 20 minutes. You can't wait more than a half-hour. I just instantly [impulsively] made a big noise and jumped out of the door."

"The child puckered her lip but didn't cry, and I took the picture, and that picture is on the wall of my studio. The mother loved the picture. She cried when she saw it."

Then there was the time that a child nearly fell off a box during a sitting.

"I put the child on a long box and asked the mother to stand right next to the child so she could grab her," Kalinian said. "The father and I were talking about the camera, and the mother was looking elsewhere, and I saw the child was falling."

Kalinian had his finger on the

shutter release and inadvertently tripped it as he rushed to the aid of the child, who was caught before hitting the floor. The lens opened, the lights flashed and a picture was taken — showing a child falling from a box.

"The girl was in a falling position with her mouth open," Kalinian said. And the surprise: the parents ordered

that very picture. "It was so natural," he said. "They liked it."

But Kalinian was unnerved by the experience. "The floor was concrete," he said. "I never used that box again."

Other photographers use a very

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different approach, one in which they are truly up close and personal with the little subjects.

"I get down to their level," said Julie Burford of Studio North. She wasn't speaking figuratively. "I get on the floor with them."

John Burroughs of Village Studio said, "We have no dignity. We get on the floor with them. We go through a lot of pairs of slacks."

Burford suggested customers take a favorite toy or baby blanket. She said her biggest challenge is "in the 2 group," 2-year-olds. "It's not uncommon to go an hour with the 2-year-old."

She said one time she was virtually stymied with a child whose mother solved the problem of a standstill by taking the child to lunch, then returning for a session that proved a snap.

Burford said infants are easier

than older children. "They smile for anybody," she said. "The infants are fun. We just make silly, stupid noises, the mother and me. We should videotape it sometime. We end up saying, 'We can't believe what we just did.'"

Burroughs said his own children are wise to tricks he is likely to pull with what he calls "a magic ball," which he uses to distract and surprise children in his studio. And they're more likely to force the less-than-genuine smile.

Burford put it this way: "Children always behave better for people other than their parents."

Jim Koike of Heritage Portrait

Studio said that a parent is "sometimes the worst person to take the picture; the children know the mother and father and won't listen to them."

Koike said taking pictures of children has become easier with experience that started when he opened his studio in 1967.

"I used to lie down on the couch in the studio after the setting, I was so exhausted."

"We get on the floor with them. We go through a lot of pairs of slacks."

John

Burroughs,
Village Studio

Bringing out the very best in your baby

Here, from Fresno professionals, are some tips for taking your own photographs of children or for getting the best results from a studio sitting:

■ Don't ask the child to smile.

"Many times it's more charming when the baby is not smiling," said Jim Koike, "when you can look into the child's mind. The smile may be a very shallow charm."

Other photographers concur, saying that the smile-on-demand is likely to be artificial.

"The expression should come from your heart, not from your face," said Paul Kalinian.

■ Avoid a cluttered background, more or less.

"If a prop adds to a picture, that's fine," Koike said. "But keep in mind that the picture is about the child, not the bears and flowers and things in a busy background."

John Burroughs holds a contrary view, favoring props that can include live lambs on "grandma's front porch" for an Easter setting.

"I've used a tapestry with floral

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prints that's very busy," he said, "but you have to know what works. The idea is to put a child in a setting where the personality comes out."

■ Keep dress simple.

Kalinian believes clothing can get in the way, that uneven folds or a tie that's askew can detract greatly from an otherwise strong portrait. Or more attention will be devoted to the beautiful clothes than to the child.

"I like to take the photograph with the child having no clothing from the waist up," he said.

■ Mention matters that interest the child to put him or her at ease.

Kalinian talks with the parents beforehand to find out what those interests might be, "maybe a trip to McDonald's or something."

■ Parents might wish to reschedule a sitting if the child is not feeling well.

Burroughs warned against bringing in children who are taking cold or allergy medicine. "It takes the life out of their little eyes," he said.

"And no candy beforehand," he added, "or they'll bounce off the walls."

Burroughs said his toughest challenges were posed by children who had just been given immunizations and may have been alarmed by bright lights

and a setting they likened to a doctor's office.

■ If in doubt, reschedule the setting.

If the child wakes up in a cranky frame of mind, it might be best to postpone the picture-taking.

■ Take along a favorite toy or blanket.

Julie Burford said some customers may use a newer toy that still holds interest "and is clean."

■ Above all else, get the picture.

That's the advice from Burford: "Don't put it off; I know so many parents who say, 'I wish I had more pictures when the child was little.'"

— By Dennis Pollock