



BECOME A SPY TO GET GREAT CHILD CANDID PHOTOGRAPHY

Quick Guide
Written by Leanne Cleaveley



One of my main reasons for getting into photography was to create some great photographs of my children that I could cherish and enjoy for many years. Knowing very little about what I needed to do this, I went out and bought a “decent” camera.

I proceeded to set my DSLR on Auto Mode and snap away. I took so many photographs only to find that out of fifty, there might be one that I felt was good enough to keep.

Knowing that the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing and expecting different results, I started to question my strategy and wonder if there was some other approach that might net me more success.

Like many beginners, I turned to friends and the internet for help. However, there is an overwhelming abundance of useful and not-so-useful information out there. Experience really is the best teacher.

In this guide, I would like to share some of my experiences with you to help you take some really great candid shots of children.

After reading this quick guide, you will be able to:

- understand the difference between posed and candid shots
- understand how to watch for and catch great candid moments
- use some tricks and tips to have children act natural around a camera
- see how photographing kids in their “natural environment” gets you better shots
- make the best use of your camera settings for great candid photographs



Photo by Quinn Dombrowski

POSED VERSUS CANDID SHOTS

First of all, what is the difference between posed and candid photographs?

Most of us are familiar with traditional school photographs, where the photographer asks you to sit with your body in a particular position, looking at the camera with a big (often cheesy) smile. The photo on the left is a posed photograph.


In posed photographs, the subject is fully aware that they are being photographed. The photographer has control over many aspects of the photo, including the position of the subject (they may ask or direct the person to move), lighting, and background.

In candid photography, a photographer has less control over the aspects mentioned above. The photographer may have to move around a lot and the subject may or may not know that they are being photographed.

The reward for all this extra work, on the part of the photographer, is catching natural expressions and moments that you otherwise would not get, through a posed photo.




Photo by Leanne Cleaveley

 **Key Lesson:** Candid shots can be challenging as you do not have control over factors such as background, lighting, and the position of your subject; but they can reward you with genuine moments that posed shots don't allow for.

There is a place for posed shots, don't get me wrong. Traditional photos, such as the family photo by the Christmas tree, are important to show how everyone has grown and are valuable milestones and keepsakes.

But some of the most powerful photographs of children, the ones that elicit an emotional response, are candid photographs. I believe that they can tell the story of childhood in a way that posed photos do not.

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn more about taking better portraits, grab a copy of Photzy's [Art of Portrait Photography premium guide](#).



HOW TO BECOME A SPY

Whether you are taking photos of your own children or grandchildren, you need to understand a bit about how children act and behave.


All kids learn through play. Play is their number one job. So, if you want to get great photos that encapsulate childhood, you need to catch them at play.

You can set this up a bit; for example, taking the children to the park is usually a no-brainer. Almost all children will spend hours on the playground, and what a great place to “spy” on them with the camera.

What exactly do I mean by “spy”? Well, I don’t mean creeping around the playground in dark clothes, as that may get you some unwanted attention from watchful parents. But I do mean be discreet with the camera, in the sense that you don’t want the kids to be overly aware that you are snapping shots of them.

I find a longer lens helps me with this, as I don't have to be right in the kid's faces when taking photographs. I can step back and zoom in without them noticing I am there.

Kids, like adults, will alter their behavior when they know they are being watched. They also tend to be much quicker to forget that they are being watched which can work to our advantage.

 **Key Lesson:** Allowing kids to do what they are best at – play – will help you get the best candid photographs.

Finally, one thing that spies are very good at is observing and predicting. You will have to practice this as well if you want to get great candid photos.

By predicting, I simply mean anticipating a moment – perhaps a hug, a laugh, a look of puzzlement or surprise. To do this well, you have to watch your kids carefully and anticipate that special moment. And be ready to capture it.

HAM IT UP!

If you have “hams” (kids that love to ham it up for a photo), then play to that. Get them to pose for a few shots and give you their silliest faces. Once they have done this and viewed the photos, as they will inevitably want to do, you can move on to your candid shots and they can move on to their play.

I should add that, after a “silly” shot (e.g. “Let’s all stick out our tongues!”) you can often catch some great smiles and laughs, so be ready to snap again right away. These shared smiles and laughs are usually some of the best photographs of children as they are acting natural.

Often, my children will call me over to take a photograph of them doing something. Again, they are posing (and possibly hamming it up) for the camera.


If you hang around a few moments after, you may catch them in a more natural shot, showing great determination or joy with something they have done. That is when you can capture a great candid photo.

If you can move around and play a bit too, the children will almost forget that you have your camera on you. One of my favorite approaches with younger children is “peek-a-boo” games through the playground equipment. After a few without the camera, quickly move in with it and catch them.



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley

If you can move around, talk, and play with the kids, all while holding your camera at the ready, they eventually just see the camera as an extension of you and forget that you are snapping away (as I said before, that forgetfulness comes in handy).

 **Key Lesson:** Children are easily distracted. Use that to your advantage when trying to catch great candid photographs



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley


KEEP IT NATURAL


If you can catch kids in their natural environment – the park, the backyard, their bedroom – doing something that they love to do – reading, throwing a ball, dressing up, blowing bubbles – then you have the recipe for some great shots.

Some of my favorite places to take candid photographs are:

- The park or playground
- The backyard
- A garden
- The beach
- At child centered events and activities, like Easter Egg Hunts, the pumpkin patch, a wildlife park, or children's sporting events/practices
- Around the house

When children are in their natural environment playing, they are easily distracted from the fact that you are taking photos of them. If you patiently wait (or spy), you will catch that magical moment of joy, wonder, or curiosity.

 **Key Lesson:** Try and catch candid photographs of children in environments that allow for them to act natural, such as a playground or their backyard.

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Photographs by Leanne Cleaveley

EMOTIONS IN MOTION

Children's emotions change quickly; they can go from happy to sad in mere seconds. Watch for those changes and don't just snap the happy ones. Sometimes, catching those other looks can tell an interesting story and elicit greater emotion than the joyful expressions that we often look for.

These two photographs were taken seconds apart. They show how quickly children's emotions can change. Be prepared to catch those changes, even the sad or angry expressions, as they encourage the viewer to ask why and wonder at the story behind those looks.

 **Key Lesson:** Watch for and photograph all emotions, including sadness or anger, as they tell an important story about childhood.

Also, children tend to wear their hearts on their sleeves. Unlike adults, who have worked hard to mask their true feelings, children's faces will show it all. So, have your camera at the ready and patiently wait for those real emotions to appear, and then snap away.




Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley

INTERACTIONS

One thing that I watch for when taking candid photographs of my children is interactions – with their siblings, other family members, and friends. There is nothing quite like catching a shared look of love, surprise, or joy between two people to really tell a story.

A child reading with another, playing catch with a grandparent, or giving the family pet a hug are all great opportunities for candid photography.

 **Key Lesson:** Try to wait for moments when children are interacting with others as these photographs will tell an interesting story.



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley


Another thing to watch for is a 'shared focus.' Watch for those moments when two or more children zoom in on the same subject.

Speaking of "zooming in," don't be afraid to do the same with your camera! I have seen great candid photographs of hands and feet that tell a real story about childhood. Zoom in on your child's hands while they are putting a puzzle together or playing with building blocks.

MOVE IT!

As mentioned above, you don't have a lot of control over the background, lighting, and placement of your subject. For this reason, you need to be mobile.

Whether you are shooting from afar, with a longer lens (in spy mode), or moving in close, you need to be ready to move to take advantage of the light and background.

 **Key Lesson:** Take a quick test shot to see that the exposure is good. You can glance at your histogram to see that there are no "blow-outs" and that you aren't underexposing your shot.

Ask yourself where your light is coming from. Is it the diffused light of a cloudy day? Is there bright sun and shadows? Are there any natural sources reflecting light that you can take advantage of? You may need to move to make the most of the light provided.

Check the background. Are there any trees, poles, or pickets? Are there any distracting objects or colors? If you have time to readjust without losing that special moment, then do it. Although trees growing out of heads can be cloned out in Photoshop, it is better to get into the habit of scanning the background to start with and will save you time in the long run.

Another thing to consider is your vertical position. Shooting from a standing position doesn't always work, as you may miss the expression on a child's face. Don't be afraid to squat or kneel – get down to their level.



In this photograph, I got down to my daughter's level (I am kneeling) to catch her expressions as she looked out the window. This shot would not have worked as well had I been standing up.

Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley



Photograph by Leanne Cleaveley


Changing your position can also change the perspective. I've had lots of fun climbing up on a structure to take "bird's eye" photos of my children playing. Getting low when snapping a shot can exaggerate angles in fun and interesting ways too.

WHAT NOW?

So you know how to watch for and even create great moments for candid shots; what now? Well, I recommend you start using Manual Mode and shoot in the RAW file format, if you aren't doing that already.

There is a real advantage to having control over the depth of field in your photograph that Auto Mode does not allow. Also, there are times that you are going to want to control shutter speed, especially if you are taking action shots.


Consider what your child is doing and take a moment to set up your camera accordingly. Get into the habit of doing this right away so that you don't have to fiddle with settings in the middle of taking photos.

 **Key Lesson:** Make a habit of checking your camera settings before you start shooting to ensure that you get the best shots possible.


If you are photographing a quiet moment between siblings, such as laying on the grass picking buttercups, shutter speed won't be a priority. But aperture and depth of field might be important if you

want to draw the focus to their hands holding the flowers or the looks of delight on their faces.

If you are photographing your child going down a slide, you will want to have a fast enough shutter speed to freeze the action and catch that look of delight/fear/accomplishment on their face.

 **Key Lesson:** Get to know your camera. Understanding the camera's functions will allow you to make the most of them when photographing children in a candid manner.

If you are a beginner photographer, take some time to familiarize yourself with your camera settings. It is worth it. You will cut down on the number of photographs you take and increase the quality of the ones you do take.

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Self Check Quiz

1. How are candid photos different from posed photos?
2. What are three things that you may not have control over when taking candid shots?
3. You need to practice and become good at making _____ and _____ special moments when taking candid photographs.
4. True or False: You shouldn't encourage kids to "ham it up" for the camera as it will be more difficult to get them to act natural.
5. One way to encourage children to be natural is to put them in settings where they can play. What are two other strategies you can use?
6. One way to tell an interesting story in your candid photos is to watch for _____ with other people or animals.
7. What is one important thing that you can do to take advantage of available light and backgrounds as a candid photographer?
8. If you are zooming in on a quiet moment between siblings, you may want to have more control over the _____ to get the best shot.
9. If you are trying to catch a shot of your child jumping in the water, you will want to have control over the _____ to ensure a great shot.

Word bank for above answers:

interactions
observations

anticipating
aperture (or depth of field)

shutter speed

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Leanne Cleaveley is a hobby photographer, part-time elementary school teacher, and full-time mother and wife. She loves reading, gardening, crafting, and music – and contemplates ways to find more time in the day to pursue her hobbies. Her photographs can be found on [Flickr](#).

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