# Portrait Photography Lighting on Location and in the Studio with John H. Siskin

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## Lesson #2: Portraits at Home

Welcome to Lesson 2.

I want to talk about working in people's homes this week. The home has a tremendous number of backgrounds for incorporating photographs of the family. One area that is used very often is the living room. And, I'd like to point out that the kitchen is underutilized in making portraits at home.

You should also consider the area outside the house as well. A great advantage to this is that you can create a family portrait business without needing a studio!

Before I get into shooting our first set of victims, I did want to suggest you look at the work of another very fine portrait photographer: Yousuf Karsh. Karsh took pictures of world leaders and great movie stars.

I am amazed that he was able to direct John Kennedy and Fidel Castro. How do you ask Castro to take his shirt off for the camera? I often look at other photographers to understand how they created timeless images.

The people you see in the following images are my friends. The couple are veterinarians, that makes them a paradox, sorry. I knew that their house did not have any great interior walls for a portrait, so I brought a cloth background.

I also knew that the child Samson is a bundle of energy. The first thing I did was to set up the cloth background and a light. I wanted to get Samson to jump up and down.

I knew that I would get a good picture if I did this, but I also knew that it would help to calm Samson down a bit. He was much

**Samson Jumping**
This helped unwind Samson for the rest of the shoot.
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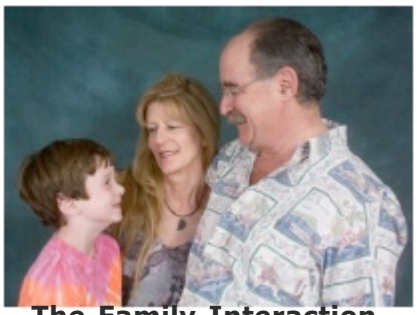
more manageable after this shot.

It was then easy to bring the parents into this shot. I did put up a second light, as you can see from this less than perfect set-up shot. The second light is in camera left. I used a 45 inch umbrella and a light panel to make this a large soft light source.



**The Family Interaction**
Soon the son will be asking for a car!
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**Set up for the Family Portrait**
Tough to set-up in a small area.
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The light on the right of the camera is a Norman 200B. It is directed into a 60-inch umbrella. This diffuses the light and reduces the shadows. The umbrellas are also placed close to the ceiling to throw any shadows down below the subjects. This is particularly important in this situation because the background is closer to the subjects than it would be in the studio. This was the only light I used with Samson jumping.

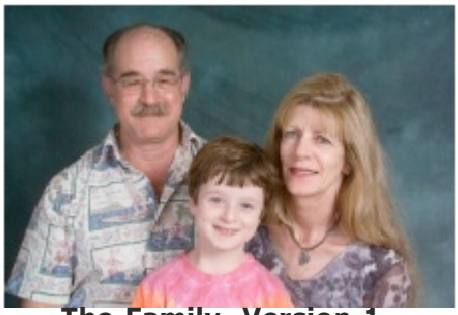
The light on the left side of the photograph is also Norman 200B set up with a 45-inch umbrella. These are

battery-powered lights that are very easy to use on location. In this case, the light is also filtered through a light panel covered with white cotton broad cloth. This makes a very even, very large light source, something like a 42X72 inch softbox. I really like this combination as a lighting tool. It is easy to set-up, cheap and extremely flexible.

I encourage everyone to practice with this lighting tool. The light on camera right is set at 100 watt-seconds, while the light on the left is set at 200 watt-seconds. The aperture was set at f6.7, and the shutter at 1/125.

I posed the family several different ways. The two I used here are my favorites. I had one of Matt, the father, holding the child, but that didn't work, Samson is a little too large.

The thing that helped a lot was having Samson stand on one of my lighting cases. I try to buy cases that I can stand on. This is much easier than bringing stepladders.



**The Family, Version 1**
These are pretty informal people.
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Ehrenbergs in the Kitchen
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The first shot shows that this is a very friendly and informal family. One of the things I want to pull into a family portrait is the home itself. I have heard it said that the kitchen is the heart of the home.

Consequently, I think that the kitchen is a great place to photograph a family. This is a small kitchen so I don't have an elegant background. I posed the family - accept for the child - informally with a glass of wine. Everybody had a great time.

As you can see from the set-up shot, I used only one light. This reduced the amount of light behind the left side of the mother, Janet. I am trying to capture the family at home in a casual atmosphere. The light is above the level of the heads of the subject, dropping the shadows down below the subjects. This is the 60-inch umbrella again.

Set-up For Kitchen Shot
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Finally, we went outside. This house has a really remarkable setting with great rocks. I wanted to find a place to integrate the family into the unusual background.

Family on the Rocks
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I tried several locations; this was one of the best. What I wanted was a background that allowed the family to be in different places on the rocks. At this point, Samson was becoming a little tired of the whole thing. I used on light for fill light, the 60-inch umbrella at a distance from the family. You can see that in the shot. I usually like to have the light close in to a shot, but in this case I wanted a little sparkle from the strobe. A smaller light source, or one that is farther away, will provide more highlights in the shot. Samson looks a little forced in this shot.

Set-up for the Rock Shot
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Don't forget that taking photos in a family's home can include pets. Pets lend both casualness and interest to a photo.

Samson and the Cat
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## Talking About Strobes

Last week, I talked a little about strobes, and I'd like to continue those thoughts now. A strobe is a device that throws a large spark through a tube filled with gas in order to produce light. The light made by these units has a very short duration, on the order of 1/1,000th of a second to as short as 1/50,000th of a second. This short duration is one of the advantages of strobe light; you do not have to worry about movement in your subject or camera.

Another advantage of strobe lighting is that the light has the same color as daylight, so you can mix strobes and daylight as you would with flash fill or in an architectural image.

The spark is made by storing power in a capacitor, then releasing the power at one moment. Since the capacitor stores power it is possible to make very powerful strobe systems that run off batteries.

It is important to keep in mind that capacitors can store a lot of power, thousands of watt-seconds. To put this in perspective it takes about 150-200 watt-seconds to restart your heart with a defibrillator; strobe power packs have as much as 4000 watt-seconds. It is very important to maintain strobe equipment, by avoiding such things as water and to have service done by a competent professional. I always use Holly Enterprises (818) 892-9020.

Although the spark creates light for a very short period of time you can only use strobes at certain shutter speeds. This is because the fastest shutter speeds on your camera are created by opening only part of the shutter at any moment. Consequently, if you use a strobe with these speeds, the shutter will be partially closed when the strobe goes off. This means part of your picture will be black. Not good!

The sync speed is the fastest speed your camera can use with a strobe, generally it is about 1/125th of a second, but this depends on the camera

model. There are a few strobes made by the camera manufacturers that will function at a higher shutter speed; oddly enough the duration of the spark is longer with these units.

I should point out that strobes allow the photographer to control the light; they do not control the light for the photographer. In order to use strobes you will need to put your camera on manual exposure. You control the strobes with the power levels, accessories and light placement.

One of the advantages of working with digital cameras is that we will be able to see the light we have made in seconds. This gives us the feedback we need in order to control our images. Because we have such feedback, we do not need meters, but we do need patience and experience.

Strobes are one of the largest investments a photographer will make. The reason to make this investment is that you can control the photographs you make to a greater degree!

The cost of new gear can run into the thousands of dollars. Consequently, it is important to think this investment through. The things that I think are important to this decision are your budget, whether you frequently work on location and the kind of projects you want to do.

Some gear is easier to use on location, other gear can give you more power, some systems have more accessories, and so on. You can also buy gear on the used market, there are certainly some bargains available on eBay and the like.

There are a few controls on most strobes: power, modeling light, slave and so on. Power is the most important control. In order to use the strobes, we will need to be able to adjust the output to match the needs of our shot; one light may require twice the power of another.

Most current gear will allow you to make shifts in power output of as little as 1/10th of a stop. This allows you greater control of your light. The only control you have to have is over power.

A great deal of the older equipment only has control in larger incremental power adjustments, often only a full stop. Because you can move a light closer or further from the subject, you can often get by with this courser level of control.

Most strobes have modeling lights. At worst, these lights show you what direction your light is pointed. The idea is that the modeling light will enable you to predict what the light will look like when you shoot it. Really, you are better off developing a sense of how the light will work so you can see it in your head.

The best control available on a model light is when it is connected to the recycling of the strobe. The modeling light goes off until the strobe is ready to work again. This can keep you from shooting faster than your strobe can charge. There are other ways to know if the system is recycled - lights and noises.

Slaves allow you to get several strobes to go off at the same time. If one strobe goes off, an optical slave causes the strobe it is attached to discharge so quickly that it will be in the exposure. There are two kinds of slaves, optical and radio. A radio slave is placed onto the hot shoe of the camera and the receiver is on the strobe. This reduces the number of cords in the studio, which is great.

There are some radio strobes, made in China, available on eBay at very reasonable prices. Optical slaves are generally pretty reasonable in price, usually under $50. You can use both at the same time - the radio slave connected to the camera and optical slaves connected to the additional strobes. There is no great advantage in having the slaves built into the strobes, and if the slave breaks, you have to take your *whole unit* in for repair.

I usually divide the available strobe equipment into three basic classes: monolights, studio strobes and battery powered strobes.

**Calumet Travelight 750**
A monolight.
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**Monolights**

Monolights have the entire equipment package for the strobe in a box with the tube that gives off the light.

The great thing about being self-contained, as these units are, is that these plug straight into the wall. This makes these units easier to use on location, you do not have to run cords back to power packs. I prefer more powerful strobes, at least 500 watt-seconds. There are a great number of manufacturers making these units.

Another concern is the accessories. These are made by secondary suppliers and the manufactures. You will want to make sure that they are available for equipment you intend to buy. I look for reflectors, softboxes, umbrellas,

snoots and grid spots for any strobe systems I consider.

Softboxes
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Norman Stove Pipe Snoot
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Norman Grid Spot
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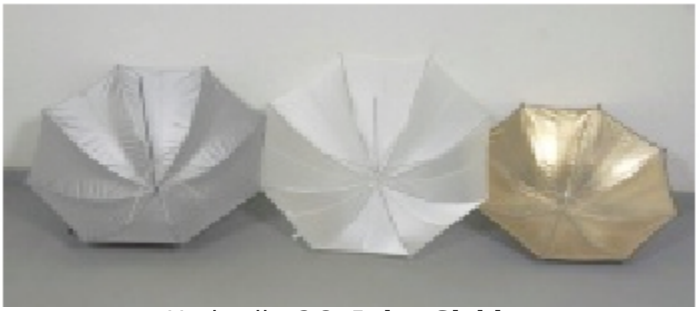

Umbrella 2**© John Siskin**
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You will find two difficulties with these units. First, if you need larger power levels, say 2000 watt-seconds, it can be hard to find units that have this much power. Second these units have not been popular until recently, so it is a little harder to find used equipment. With any strobe system it is better to get all your gear from one manufacturer. This will help you to maintain the same color of light.

Norman 5
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This is a 2000 watt-second power pack. It will power up to 7 heads. I can control the power in 3 different sorts of groups. It has model light controls and switches for power levels.
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## Studio Stobes

Studio strobes do not need to stay in the studio. I just don't have another good name for them. These units work by separating the controls and the capacitors from the lights. Each light needs to plug into a powerpack and one powerpack may support several lights. Power packs are frequently available with power levels of more than 2000 watt-seconds.

Another nice thing about these units is that all the lights can be controlled from one power-pack. These units were what everybody used when I started doing professional strobe, so there are many of the units used, often at extremely attractive prices. Generally, most accessories will fit on these units. You can also use slaves to run additional power-packs for the same shot.

I should point out that many studio strobes and monolights will now have special battery packs available, as an accessory. While these tools extend the utility of monolights and studio strobes, they are not nearly as flexible as the equipment designed to be battery powered. I have a large number of battery

powered 200 watt-second units that I use all the time on location.

While I would certainly like to have even more powerful bbattery lights, quantity will do the job. I now have seven of these lights and their reasonably small packs with batteries and capacitors inside. The lights fit into small cases and are easy to use for location work.

Norman 200B System

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Strobes are the most powerful and creative lighting tools that photographers have available. They do require some work in order to master. The ability to make photographs rather than take photographs is worth the expense and time.

In teaching this class, I keep trying to find ways to say that you have moved into the land *beyond* metering. When you use a strobe meter you get a response that tells you how to make a middle density, but it doesn't tell you how to make it look right. There is no automatic way to make it look right, only the application of brain power can do that.

When I make a shot with strobes and a digital camera, the first thing I do is to put the camera on manual. I pay **no** attention to the meter in the camera.

The only things I pay attention to are the proof image on the camera back and the Histogram. More than metering, these two things tell you the most about your image.

**Let me suggest a plan and procedure for seeking the right exposure:**

1. Set the shutter speed to the sync speed.

2. Set the aperture to your middle aperture, whatever that is on the lens you are using.

3. 3. Take a picture - it will be most likely be wrong.

4. Move the aperture dial to let in more or less light based on test exposure 1, you can look at the histogram to help determine how much to change the aperture, but the proof image should tell you if you need to change a lot or a little.

5. Make more test exposures and changes of light placement and light power until the strobes are right.

6. Change shutter speed to balance values between existing light and strobe light. This will require more test pictures. This same technique will work if you are mixing strobes and daylight. This was why the Polaroid bill was so high with film cameras, but with digital these test exposures are free, so we should not be afraid to make them.

The essential trick with strobes is to evaluate and change our images in search of the right levels for our lights and our exposures. With the Histogram and the proof image on camera or in the computer, we have better tools for creating the right exposure than any meter could give us. But it does take repeated testing.

A digital camera also meters light color. This is what the White Balance is for. It is one of several ways to control color in the digital camera. For instance, if you are taking a digital image of a dramatic sunset on auto color, the finished picture will probably be disappointing. If you manually set the color to the daylight preset (your camera has several presets), the sunset would have more of the color saturation you perceive. And if you shoot in Raw, you have more opportunity to perfect your shot later in a software Photoshop application.

A *neutral gray card* allows you to set the camera to the actual color of the light. So, for instance, I have set several gray card readings into my camera for the various strobes I own. This allows me to set my camera to my lights very quickly.

If I am doing something with more complex light color, I take a shot of the gray card first, with the complex light. I will save this file and shoot my job. When I am doing the post work, I will use this first shot to balance all of the images I did in this set.

It is also possible to do a gray balance with the first shot in the camera and apply this balance to all the shots as I shoot them. This reduces post production software work, but it *does not* improve my ability to control my shot.

Manufacturers now make warm and cool *gray cards* to give you additional control over color, but you would have even more control in Raw. The standard gray card is an even flat gray, so it provides a neutral color response. The reflectance is not critical, but working in a middle density provides a better file than working at very light or very dark settings.

## Model Releases

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I have made a lot of new images for this class because the shots I use in this venue need to have a model release. A model release is a legal document that allows the photographer to publish a picture in which the person's identity could be easily recognized. You need a release for any usage of a recognizable person - be it an adult or a child - that is used commercially, unless the person is a politician or other very public person. There are many Internet resources for model release forms. The American Society of Media Photographers (ASMP) is a major professional organization and publishes various books. This ASMP page includes information and links to model release forms: http://www.asmp.org/tutorials/property-and-model-releases.html
Keep a few release forms handy in your camera cases. Keep a few release forms handy in your camera cases.

I am an assignment photographer. Companies hire me to produce images for advertising and marketing as well as other company communications. Companies do not want to lose control of their image. Neither Disney or General Motors will allow me to use images made for their companies for other commercial purposes.

Since these classes at BetterPhoto are sold for money, many of my favorite commercial images cannot be used here. The greatest advantage of assignment photography is that you know you will be paid, and about how much, before the job begins. Another wonderful thing about assignment photography - or, if you prefer, *commercial photography* - is that you can work with the same clients many times in a year.

## Make-up

Make-up on a Video Shoot
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I'd like to take a minute to talk about make-up. Make-up can really help us as photographers, but only when it is done right! The first reason I want a make-up artist when I work with women is that women often do their own make-up that is ill-suited for photography.

I think most women do makeup that is meant to be viewed from a distances of several feet, where it will reflect positive, personal attention. It can be difficult to get woman to change their make-up unless you have a

professional make-up artist on hand.

An on-site make-up artist will also increase a subject's interest in seeing the final photographs. Subject's tend to trust a make-up artist more than the photographer. In addition to making the pictures more anticipated, make-up will frequently save you a lot of corrective time in Photoshop.

If you shoot 200 or 300 images of a subject, could you imagine removing a facial mole from all of these shots? The way this helps the photographer most is that the work is done on the face before we shoot so that the blemish is amended on all the photos. Finally, a good make-up artist can make people feel better about themselves.

Make-up on a TV shoot

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The flip side problem is that not all make-up artists are created equal. If you have a good make-up artist, this is a big help to your business. A bad make-up artist is less than no help.

I recently arranged for a make-up artist to be at a shoot. I had discussed location, price and so on. The day of the shoot the artist called and insisted on more money. Since I couldn't replace the make-up artist on the day, I had to spend the extra money. I am very unlikely to work with this person ever again.

Here's another problem I've seen: the make-up artist forgot to blend the make-up into the throat. This made-up face and unmade-up throat looked very unnatural. I have seen more unprofessional behavior, particularly constant complaining. This truly interferes with the manner and appearance of your subject. Of course, there are more good people out there than bad people, but it pays to hang onto a talented make-up artist that you can work with.

A make-up artist will often start with the eyes. One reason is that the eye make-up won't fall and attach itself to the face powder, which is hard to clean.

If you start with the eyes, you can clean up any trace of the eye make-up that falls on the face. The goal with the eyes is to make them appear larger and more youthful. Part of this is accomplished by using a darker color at the outer edge of the eye.

Eye Make-up

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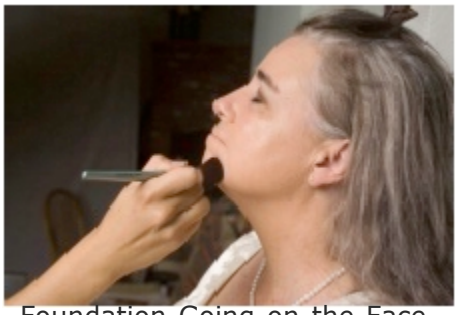
The foundation goes on the rest of the face. Be careful to blend this into the throat and neck. A darker product, often a bronze, goes onto the face below the cheekbones. This will make the face appear thinner. This same product can be used below the chin. This colorization strengthens the chin line and makes the face look younger. This also helps to hide a double chin or improve a week chin; both are good things!



Foundation Going on the Face

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An important goal of make-up is to remove reflections from the nose. Often you can get two nose reflections if you do not use make-up.

One of the last accomplishments completed to the face is to put on a light blush. This helps the face look younger and more vibrant.

The very last thing is most often the lips. The make-up artist will frequently start with a moisturizer, followed by a lipstick and then a gloss.

In the end, a good make-up artist needs a steady hand and a good attitude. They can save your shoot when they are good, and just ruin your day if bad.

The following shot was made after the make-up session. The idea was to depict this woman as the great hostess she is. I used the light panel and the umbrella for this shot.

I did not use a second reflector light on the subject. I felt that an additional light source would add more body weight to the subject.

Shadow can help a person appear thinner. I directed another light behind the subject into a gold umbrella. The gold umbrella warmed the light. The main light was at 250 watt-seconds and the gold umbrella was at 50 watt-seconds.

The reason I used so little light was that I wanted limited depth-of-field so that the background would be in soft focus. I was not happy about the make-up on the subject. It was not as natural as I would have liked.

Set-up for the hostess shot

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The Hostess
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Frankly, I was not very happy with the make-up on this entire shoot. Her eyes were made to look sort of "raccoonish". Additionally, the foundation looks thick.

Good make-up artists pay attention to their subject; bad ones do the same job on everyone.

Additionally, this was the aforementioned make-up artist that demanded more money the day of the shoot. I feel this contract was wholly unprofessionally executed.

**Susan in the Hostess Shot**
Poor make-up.
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Video Shoot
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The make-up on these two women for the video shoot was much better. If you find a good make-up artist, hang onto them!

Next week, we will move on to *Shooting Portraits at Work*.

Please review and keep in mind last week's information about the assignments for this course.

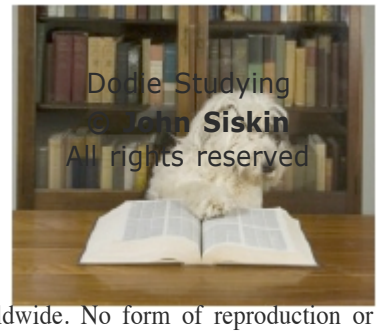
### Your Assignment: Portraits at Home

Shoot portraits at home; upload 3 of the best portraits. It would be even better if you could shoot some people other than your own family. This is a good model for a business, so it is worth your time to do several shoots. I want you to tell me how you did the lighting and send set up shots. As always you can use a phone to shoot a set up shot, and set-up shots don't count as 1 of your three portraits.

Have a great time! It's important to have fun. And send me some questions.

Thanks!

John

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Marketing Your Business

Since I know some of you are already in business, and others are thinking along those lines, I wanted to throw a question out to all of you, how are you looking for business? Since this is a professional course I think that a discussion about this is very important. You might also comment on your target market; for instance are you looking global or local. Hopefully we can all benefit fror this discussion! I am going to start this on the class Q&A. I'm going to start it with some stuff from a previous version of this thread in an earlier course. Most of these posts are related to portrait business, but this is a good place to start! Please check it out.

I am also starting a thread about equipment. I hope we can keep discussion about what to buy and equipment problems in this thread. I think this will help everybody get more information. I should point out that a lot of good used lighting equipment is out there. I would be happy to give you information about it. You can learn a lot about lighting with just clamp lights, but to really do lighting you need strobes.

The changing business environment for photography is a real problem for photographers. I have just been notified that another lab I used has closed! Some of the things that used to work, say the phone book, aren't working for me any more. One thing that is working is www.craigslist.org. I get a couple of things a month from this source. I also check out www.getafreelancer.com/and www.guru.com, not a lot of jobs but it is important to keep looking. Another thing that I am doing is HTML mail to people I would have sent post cards to in the past, much cheaper! Here's some earlier posts on this subject.

Re: where you get your work. I know my business may be a lot different than most of yours. I primarily shoot kids and families. When we moved to Colorado (4 years) ago I had kids in elementary and preschool. went to both of their schools and said if they let me do a shooot of the kids, I'd donate back part of my profits to the school. Win, win. At the elementary I do shots of the kids out on the playground and at the preschool I do a shoot with a background and lights. I usually tie this shoot in with a theme (rodeo week) Then I only print in black and white. Parents LOVE black and whites of their kids!! Black and white is also very forgiving! They also love knowing they are giving to their school. This has then turned into sibling shoots and family shoots. My business has grown only by word of mouth. It also helps to have a website. When Aunt Suzy 45 minutes up the road looks at her neice's images she can then contact me to do her own family's portraits.

Do any of you shoot kids and families and do you have any unique ideas? I'd love to hear them.

After reading John's idea of Craig's list I found a kid's magazine posting.... right up my alley. I'm going to wait until after this class and I have lighting mastered and GO FOR IT!! Thanks, John!!

I also offer a coffee table book that my clients have gone crazy over! They have to spend a certain $$ amount with me and then I offer this book with 20-35 of their images printed on the pages. It is done by Shutterfly.com and the quality is great. Shutterfly even prints my logo on the back page so they don't know it is from Shutterfly. This is also great advertisment because my clients are so proud to carry it to the hairdresser, school, dr appoint, etc. Shutterfly runs specials often.

I live in a small town too, of about 6000. I have 2 kids who have been heavily involved in volleyball for the past 8 years, so I have followed them around the country to many tournaments at various schools. Something I've seen that I think looks like a great opportunity is action shots and team photos at these tournaments. I think this would go over well at any kind of sporting event. If you have a laptop or two, you can show the images of the action shots to the participants between their games and they can select the ones they want. Groups shots could be set up to be taken anywhere in the school and would be nice becaus you would probably sell a copy to every member of the team. Not sure if any of you are into this type of photography or not, and I haven't yet done it myself but I think it's something worth investigating.

RE: getting business.... my theory is get them as young as you can.... you shot them in preschool, they have older sibiling then that will need a shot to match the one the child in preshool had, then the whole family will need the shot, the elementary kids eventually turn into seniors, get married, have babies, and you are their FAMILY photographer.