

# Start your own family portrait business

When everyone has a camera, you need to offer families something special. The pros share their tips for starting a company



© Anna McCarthy

**A**s the population grows, so does the demand for family portraiture – it's now one of the most popular first-time businesses for photographers. The rewards include roaming outdoors, meeting new people daily, and producing something that parents will treasure. "When I hand over framed prints or an album, I'm handing over something that I hope the clients would rescue in the event of a fire," says photographer Anna McCarthy ([www.annamccarthy.com](http://www.annamccarthy.com)), who has had over a decade in the business. "They say they can't replace that; it's their child at that moment."

As a prime example of pursuing your ambitions, Anna turned 30 and decided to pack up her desk at the BBC and leave for a creative career away from the air-conditioned confines of an office. She enrolled on a diploma course in photographic practice, picked up her first professional DSLR and has been hitting the shutter every day since. When there are so many genres open to new photographers, though, why choose portraiture? "When I was at college, family portraiture was very much seen as second rate to becoming an fashion or even corporate photographer, and I had the absolute reverse attitude towards it," recalls Anna. "Photographing real people and real events is what interested me." It was at a point in her life when weddings and baby showers were being scribbled in the diary on a monthly basis, meaning there were plenty of opportunities for building a portfolio to present to prospective clients.

Before you set out to offer your services, you need to decide what kind of client you want to attract. "You have to decide who your market is," Anna explains. "Mine is mostly high-end with a budget of a thousand pounds plus to spend on their family shoot. Are you going to be a photographer who does 20 shoots a week and bangs them out on a disc for a small amount of money? Or are you going to do three shoots a week and produce beautiful archival work that becomes heirlooms for your client?" It's a question that will affect your pricing structure and your workflow, but a more immediate matter at hand for first-timers is kit considerations. Fortunately for this genre, it's a case of 'less is more'. "When photographing a child, you need to anticipate the narrative of what's happening while you're in that child's company, and you don't want to be thinking

## LAUGHING CHILD

"This little boy was laughing at his mummy as she did a dance for him around the pushchair. Always involve parents in the shoot as they know what makes them really smile and laugh"  
**Shot details:** Nikon D700 with a 50mm lens at 50mm and f3.5, 1/400sec, ISO 200



© Anna McCarthy

## "I photograph tantrums, tears and obstinacy as well as beautiful smiles and reflective moments"

about your kit," says Anna, who always carries a 35mm f1.4 lens in her kit bag. "You could shoot a whole family session on that lens. You've got to move more but that's better than just standing still and zooming in and out."

Favouring fixed, fast lenses, Anna also carries a 50mm for wide-angle group shots and portraits, an 85mm for close-ups and a 70-200mm telephoto for those moments when the child embraces big open spaces. "If I can't get to them, I might swap the lens," she explains. "I can get the compressed perspective with the zoom as well as a shallow depth of field. Most people love that because they can't get that in their own photos. Offering what they can't get is a good way forward, especially when most families own their own digital camera these days."

You need to be a master of your kit, knowing how to use it under pressured conditions as well as being a post-production whiz. Retouched photos will impress your client and make for an easier sell, so hone your workflow system to enable you to edit in record time. Finished images can then be uploaded (compressed and watermarked) to your website for the client to view, or you can arrange a face-to-face meeting for more immediate feedback. "You've got to be able to sell those pictures, presenting them and having a visual eye for the end result," Anna says. "I produce framed pictures and high-quality albums; I don't hand over digital files because some lousy prints with rubbish paper can be produced from a retailer and that reflects badly on you."



© David Randall-Goddard

## MOTHER & SON

"This mother is talking to her son about his school and what he likes doing best. He's very relaxed and listening, which makes for a natural and intimate portrait"  
**Shot details:** Nikon D700 with a 70-200mm lens at 200mm and f4, 1/400sec, ISO 200

## CAUGHT IN THOUGHT

"This high-key portrait captures the child staring pensively at the camera. The muted, dark colours draw focus to his face"  
**Shot details:** Canon EOS 5D Mark I with 28-70mm lens at 70mm and f11, 1/250sec, ISO 50

## 5 steps to success

Capture Photography take us through the five key stages of a shoot

### Meeting the client

Family portraiture is very personal. It is important when meeting new clients to be open and friendly; it's good to strike up a rapport. Our approach to clients is pretty laid back. Having children of your own helps, as we find that we relate to them and their children very easily. We will discuss some ideas with the client, and advise what to bring on the day of the session.

### Pricing

Before you start out it is important to have a clear pricing structure – keep it simple and be transparent. Set your fees according to your expertise and the type of images you are providing. Don't undervalue your work. It is important to recognise that you are running a business and not a hobby.

### The shoot

Every family is different. Some will be relaxed and others will be nervous about being in front of the camera. Make friends with the kids, joke with them and have some fun. We will normally tell parents we don't want them to force their children in any way, as it is important that they stay happy and that the session evolves naturally. Their experience during the shoot will often determine what they might order, and will hopefully keep them coming back in the future.

### Post-production

We invite them back to the studio to view a definitive gallery that has been shortlisted, edited and retouched according to the package they have purchased. There is an option to publish the galleries online. Customers can view their images via our website using the client area where they can securely log in. Be aware that customers generally take longer to place their order when the gallery is online, and always watermark your images to safeguard your work.

### Products

Our most popular products are prints ranging from 7 x 5 inches to 16 x 20 inches, canvases and bespoke framing. Copyright-free digital files are becoming more popular. Clients want the freedom to shop around and find the best deals in which to reproduce their favourite photos.

To find out more about Capture Photography, visit [www.youhavecharacter.co.uk](http://www.youhavecharacter.co.uk).



© Capture Photography

Having fun is an important aspect of family portraiture shoots

Q&A

Darren Harbar

This pro launched his business by announcing it on a billboard!

What made you decide to go into this genre for your first business?

I've always enjoyed portrait photography, and having a three-year-old daughter has certainly helped to focus my mind on the subject of family photography. There's a certain magic in capturing family images, especially when younger children are involved. Regardless of my passion for this subject, there's also the important factor of there always being a demand for this type of work. As children grow so fast, families won't wait to have pictures taken and miss out on recording those special moments. It therefore made better business sense to follow this genre.

How did you get started?

My photography skills were actually irrelevant if nobody knew I was in business, so I invested in some local advertising, which included a billboard outside the main supermarket in the town where I live. It was a bit of a bold way to start, but the people of Biggleswade certainly knew that a new family photography business was in town!

You can't possibly ask too many people for advice. If you can attend a course like the Aspire training team offer, then it's well worth doing. I would also recommend the government Business Link courses as these are designed to give you buckets full of advice on running your own business.

What advice would you give to others looking to start their own business?

The most important thing is to understand that your photography skills are not what's going to get your business started and bring in customers. You have to invest plenty of time in getting people to know you are there. I never stop thinking about my marketing and what to do next. It's this that will build and develop your business most.

For more go to [www.darrenharbar.co.uk](http://www.darrenharbar.co.uk).

▶▶ JAMES AND CALLUM

"This candid shot looks timeless thanks to the black-and-white conversion, and the footpath offers great lead-in lines to draw the viewer's eye into the image"

Shot details: Nikon D3 with 80-200mm lens at 120mm and f2.8, 1/250sec, ISO 1600



© Ken Sharp

◀ GIRL WITH CAT

"The girl found a stray kitten and befriended it. When things like that happen on a shoot you strike gold because the subject gets distracted, in this case by a kitten, and you can then observe and get really natural images"

Shot details: Nikon D700 with a 70-200mm lens at 200mm and f2.8, 1/50sec, ISO 800

▶ FAMILY OF SILHOUETTES

"To get a good silhouette, you need to expose for the highlights and then overexpose again. It is a good idea to bracket a bit. Then in post-production you can tweak to get a really stylised but fun image like this"

Shot details: Nikon D700 with a 70-200mm lens at 42mm and f2.2, 1/250sec, ISO 400



© Anna McCarthy

Of course, other business owners choose to give their clients free reign of the images – for a price. Ken Sharp ([www.kensharp.com](http://www.kensharp.com)), a rock and celebrity shooter turned family portrait photographer, offers digital packages. "Most people don't have any idea of the costs of running a photography business or of professional equipment and materials," he points out. "They equate the prices you charge for a print to what it costs them from Boots. For that reason we tend to put value on the images as opposed to the prints. This means that the client can spend a little on one or two photos or they can spend a lot on buying all the digital images." This gives the client flexibility with how much they spend, with the popular digital package enabling them to view a DVD slide show of their photo session.

That photo shoot can either be in a studio or on location, with the latter proving a popular choice with the pros we consulted. "I work exclusively in our clients' homes," says Ken. "I feel it is very important that the photos include backgrounds that are personal to the family so that they will be reminders of that time and place in their lives. It also means that the photos are unique to that family and not just an anonymous background in a studio." This also serves to relax the subject, providing plenty of opportunities for candid shots.

Kent-based photographer Russell Harper ([www.harperphotography.co.uk](http://www.harperphotography.co.uk)) decided to offer both when he turned freelance. "Going to a studio shoot feels a bit more special for the clients, and they tend to dress up for those sessions," he explains. "But I'm lucky here in Sevenoaks that we have some lovely parks and beauty spots, so location shoots are my preference. In fact, mums of young children often really like the idea that I will go to their home so

that they don't need to traipse to a studio." Working with youngsters is a notoriously challenging vocation, but Russell's discovered a few tricks along the way. "When photographing babies I sometimes wear a jester's hat with bells on it, so that I can draw their eyes to me by shaking my head, and I can keep both hands on the camera," he shares.

To get started in your own venture, you need to let potential clients know that you exist. Russell recommends attending local business networking

Randall-Goddard did when he set up his business 15 years ago ([www.familyportraits.uk.com](http://www.familyportraits.uk.com)). He remembers the first hurdle: "The first problem was how to price ourselves. We discovered in the first three months that we were actually making a loss! You need to factor in the cost of advertising, cards, paper and ink, electricity, software, hardware such as cameras and lenses, and your time involved. But I think the most important consideration is: what do you think you are worth?" Research other

family photographers in the surrounding area and see what they offer in order to get an idea of numbers and remain competitive. You may have to charge less in the beginning in order to build your confidence while developing a good body of work.

The family portraiture business is a demanding enterprise that requires you to be dedicated to all aspects of the shooting process, from landing the client to delivering the glossy prints. One thing that all the professionals we spoke to agreed on was that word of mouth is the best method for booking more jobs, so paying that extra bit of attention to the present client will pay off for the future. It can be tough, but if all is not going to plan and the toddler you're photographing is screaming and kicking,

David's advice is to keep on shooting. "I photograph tantrums, tears and just plain obstinacy as well as beautiful smiles and reflective moments," he says. "Children have a marvellous truth about their feelings and actions, and most clients end up choosing at least a few images like that because they're honest moments." DP

"You've got to be able to sell those pictures, presenting them and having a visual eye for the end result"

groups or meetings in your area as a source of advice. These also double as a great place to meet web designers and printers who could become contacts. Friends and family members can help you to practise your technique and, in turn, build a portfolio to prove your worth. "I took out a small advert in my local paper offering free sittings to beautiful babies as part of a portfolio-building exercise," he says. "Of course, every mum thinks her baby is beautiful, so I had a good response and did some sittings that all resulted in the parents buying from me, so it was a profitable exercise as well as giving me extra experience."

Advertising and marketing needn't be expensive; you can get business cards printed with your photographs on, which you can deliver to shops and cafes where mothers tend to visit. This is exactly what David

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