



25

Christmas
Photo Tips

from

Nick Kelsh

www.HowToPhotographYourLife.com

getting closer with your camera and your heart

Ah...
'Tis the season
to capture the magic.
So here's my gift to you...



25 Christmas Photo Tips

May your holidays—and your photos—be merry and bright.

Nick



25 Christmas Photo Tips

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Theresa Mary Stem

Tip #1 Oh, Christmas tree!
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It's certainly one of the more glorious symbols of Christmas—a tree of light! People actually travel hundreds of miles to watch the lights on public trees go bright. It used to be candles and now it is electric lights, but the effect is the same; a totally impractical tradition renders us speechless and peaceful every year. It never gets old.

One of the cardinal sins of Christmas photography is photographing the blessed tree with the flash on. If you do, you'll completely overpower the glow of the tree and may end up with a picture that looks like the lights weren't even on in the first place.



On the other hand, the tree glows brighter and brighter in your pictures as the exposure gets longer. In a dark room, with only the tree lights on, it's practically impossible to overexpose a Christmas tree. As long as the shadows in the room are still black the overall effect of the picture will still look properly exposed— even if the tree looks brighter in the pictures than it did in reality.

As the shutter speed gets longer, keeping the camera still becomes more important. Maybe Santa will be delivering a tripod under your tree this Christmas.

A huge tree covered with lights is a majestic sight in any community. Make sure you share it with the public relations people at the mayor's office; they will thank you all year long. It's a wonderful Christmas gift to your community.

Photo by Marcia Richardson



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Kristina Yamin

Tip #2 The power of the annual card
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A picture is worth a thousand words. Some people prefer to send an annual letter, but there is something about seeing the faces of the people that matter to you that just can't be beat. And since your card could very well be sitting on the fridges and notice boards of your friends until next December, it is probably a good idea to put some thought into it!

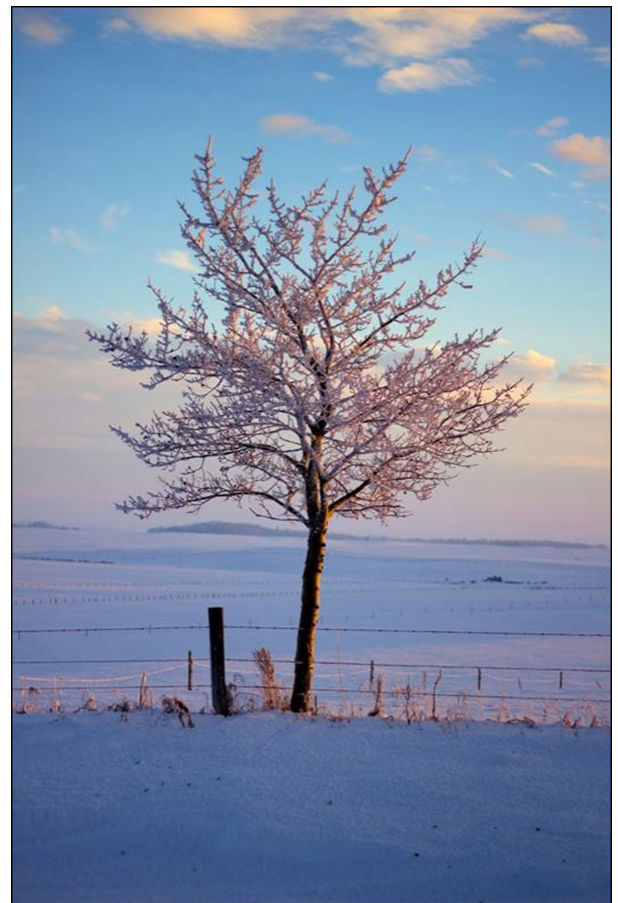
Getting the whole family to all be still and smiling at the camera at the same time could be a Christmas miracle in itself, so plan ahead. Keep clothing simple and coordinated (coordinated does not mean matching). Consider taking your photo at a time of the year when everyone is dressed up already, like Thanksgiving or a friend's wedding. While the more formal approach might be what you prefer, it can be fun to simply get everyone in their Christmas jammies, or throw a Santa hat on everyone in the photo.

Keep the background of your photo in mind – be careful of surfaces like mantels and fireplace glass that can be reflective, or living rooms that are just too cluttered. Rather opt for a plain, light-colored wall inside, or a landscape of trees outside, and purposefully bring the holidays into your photo by using props like hats and ornaments (they also keep little hands busy and occupied).

You will probably have to take dozens of photos to get that one money shot. This will be true whether you have squirmy toddlers or surly teenagers in your photos. In fact, you may actually be better off skipping the stiff poses altogether. A shot of everyone cracking up because someone hiccupped could very well be the shot that represents your fun-loving family best. And be sure to use a tripod and a self-timer and get in the frame yourself. Being the family photographer doesn't mean you're not part of the family anymore.

Flash off, and get in close. You didn't think you'd read photography advice from Nick Kelsh and not hear that, did you? But really, get in close. Nobody cares about the color of your boots – they really just want to see how much the kids have changed since last year. One good close-up of everyone's faces is all it takes to put a smile on the faces of your friends.

([Watch my "A Christmas Card" video](#) for more tips on holiday card photos.)



And if December 20th rolls around with no card forthcoming, all hope is not lost. A striking photo that represents winter where you live can be a lifesaver. Just get everyone to sign their names and you're done. Now where are those stamps...?

Photo by Sharlene Meetsma Hyink



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Vikki Ford

Tip #3 Find the magic light

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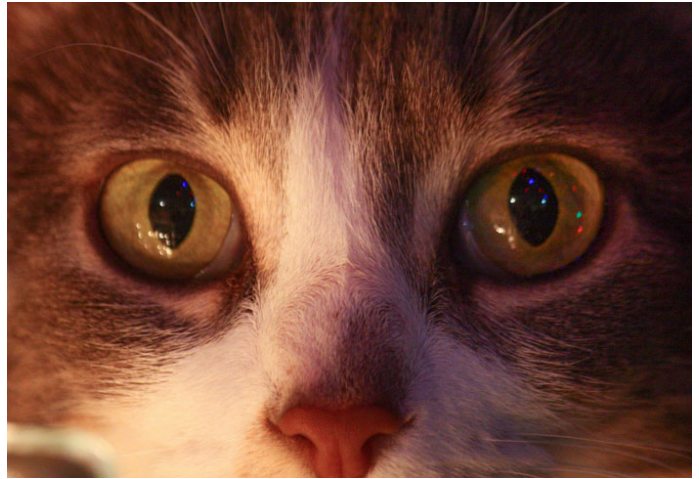
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It's the season of light and fortunately there are several different beautiful sources that come out of the closets at this time of the year. Candles seem to find their ways to mantles and window sills and even babies can pose with our low-voltage strings of electric lights without being shocked. (Even if you did get a little surprise, it would only be minor. Exciting, but not damaging. Christmas lights will not hurt you. Let's face it, if they could, we'd all be dead.)

A string of Christmas lights may look bright in a dark room but that can be deceptive. You will need to turn up your ISO to shoot sharp portraits of people close to Christmas lights. The high ISO allows you to use a faster shutter speed. The price you pay for that privilege may be a little digital noise or grain. Some pre-Christmas festivities experimentation is in order.

Turn your ISO up to 1600 or, if your camera is relatively new, 3200 and practice. View your early efforts on your computer monitor and not on the back of the camera if you really want to see what's happening.

A string of Christmas lights is a wonderful way to shoot a portrait of a young child. Simply lay them on the floor in a dark room in a pile and get on your belly with your camera, prepared to make magic.



Even a few points of colored light turn a close up into a Christmas statement. God loves the animals, too.
Photo by Annette Dakota



Candles say Christmas!

The subject is 20 inches from the candle.

1/6th sec. / f4 / ISO 1600

MANUAL exposure

Flash OFF

Hold your camera VERY still!

It's a good time to use your tripod.

This is just a place to start.

Experimentation required.



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Christy Eilers Wade



Tip #4 Add some props
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Adding some festive props to the photos you take over the holidays can transform them from ordinary snapshots to memories that can be treasured forever. Yes, setting up a manger scene with 9 toddlers, or tying a small tree to your son's toy car will produce unforgettable photographs. But don't think you have to go to those lengths to make something special.

You can't beat the famous red Santa hat to create that classic Christmas picture. The best part is that just about anybody can pull this off. Pass a hat to Grandpa, or the kids, or pull one over your dog's ears, and be fast with your camera as you see the Christmas magic happening. And putting an oversized red hat on your baby will just put it over the top and have everyone cooing about the cuteness of it all.

Embrace the whimsical fashions of Christmas time, and take photos of those ugly sweaters and Christmas socks. It is the one time of the year that you can get away with it!

Photos by Kathy Murray and Kristen St. Clair



Christmas ornamental balls, the bigger the better, will add a whole lot of visual interest to any holiday photo. You don't have to do anything special with them either - just scatter them around the scene, put some smiling people in the middle, and snap away. If you will have kids around these balls, make sure they are the shatterproof kind, so that if one breaks, the little ones stay safe.

You can also use a chalkboard to share your holiday message with the world. Or buy some inexpensive letters of words like NOEL or JOY from your local craft store, and decorate it with a simple coat of paint to match your photo's color scheme. Let your photo subjects hold the board or letters or lean it against a wall. And check your spelling. Twice!



Pretty much anything wrapped in red, or framed in red, or with a red background, will scream Christmas for the entire month of December. If the red is velvety soft, even better.

Photo by Crystal Gord Raynard



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Beth Thomander

Tip #5 It's in the prep
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For many, the joy of Christmas is to be found in the journey, not the destination. Sure, Christmas Day with its gifts and meals will obviously be the star of the show. But the preparation for the big day is filled with photographic opportunities.

Prepping for the holidays starts with the selection of the tree. While I can't guarantee any great photo opportunities of you lifting your artificial tree out of its box, there are lots of great photos to be taken if you are chopping or selecting a live tree. Adding snow to the mix, either falling or on the ground, will enhance the atmosphere of your photo. Expect lots of action—saws or axes in motion, trees being dragged, unsecured trees flying off cars—so keep your shutter speed fast to capture it all cleanly. And the photo of your kids pulling the big tree behind them will prove to be a winner every time.



Preparing for Santa's arrival is a classic worldwide tradition. People don't need to be sharp and in focus to tell a story. And everyone knows about the cookies and milk, but don't forget the carrots. They're like reindeer Hershey bars. Photo by Sarah White



Please be sure to pay homage to all the cooking and baking that will be done. And that doesn't mean taking photos of sweaty cooks in the kitchen (unless they are kids with frosting smeared on their cheeks). Showing willing helpers serving beautiful food will do just fine. Photo by Beth Thomander



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Record all the hard work that goes into decorating for the holidays. This is a great time to get creative with angles and perspectives. Look up with your camera as your husband stands on a ladder hanging outside lights. Or point your camera over your child's shoulder and capture tiny fingers decorating cookies. Ultimately these family moments leading up to the day are what you will want to remember in years to come.



Kids and Christmas trees and snow and a Christmas tree stand a couple blocks from home—it's tough to beat. This photograph is dedicated to the memory of Norman Rockwell.

Photo by Nick Kelsh



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Tip #6 The amazing pizza box lighting unit
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Every Christmas someone asks me how to take that classic shot of kids in front of a Christmas tree. And I always end up telling them exactly what they don't want to hear. It's more complicated than you would think.

The basic problem is that you're asking your subjects to turn their backs on a beautiful light source. If you position them so their faces are being lit by the tree the kids look great but it can be difficult to get the tree in the background. **If you use a flash the kids are blasted with bright white light.** The tree lights are overwhelmed and left in the darkness of the background. It's a dilemma.

The best of both worlds would be a glowing tree behind beautiful lit, glowing faces.

The solution I finally arrived at—and it took me years to figure this out—was to light the kids with another set of Christmas lights that would mimic the magic light of a Christmas tree. Enter what many people consider to be my greatest invention; **The Pizza Box Lighting Unit.**



One of the highlights— no pun intended— of the Pizza Box Lighting Unit are the catch lights reflected in your subject's eyes—part icicles / part elf dust. Anything that twinkles at Christmas time looks good in photographs.



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A pizza box is a natural reflector (And it's free. It may not, however, be clean. Some maintenance may be required.) If you attach a set of Christmas tree lights to an open pizza box the foil doubles the light output. The final cherry on top for me was attaching a coat hanger to the box so I could hang my lighting unit on a nearby chair. It's a thing of beauty.

My wife scoffed at this idea when it was first hatched but she has since eaten a lot of crow. Several dozen people on Facebook have built their own Nick Kelsh Pizza Box Lighting Unit to great success. Sometimes I'm full of baloney and just make up stupid stuff but this was not one of those times. This thing really works and does everything I said it would—another first. You can [watch a video](#) of me demonstrating my invention in the special feature at the end of my "A Christmas Card" video. Enjoy!

A good starting exposure would be something like 1/60 of a second, F2 .8, at ISO 800.

The Nick Kelsh Pizza Box Lighting Unit is available on our website for \$500. (The autographed model is \$3700 plus delivery by a pizza delivery man.)

Postscript: If you don't have your act together to build one this year, keep your eyes open after Christmas for discounted Christmas lights—they practically give them away.



A real picture taken by a real mom with a real Pizza Box Lighting Unit. (On Earth.) Amazing.

Photo by Diane Lewis



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Like its distant relative, the Apollo 11 Lunar Lander, it may not be pretty but it works. A pizza box, aluminum foil, one string of LCD Christmas lights (more would be brighter and therefore better), some of those plastic ties and duct tape and you're in business. I attached a wooden coat hanger to the backside and that proved to be key to the success of this cutting-edge photographic lifesaver—it makes it much more convenient to work with. As with all lighting equipment, a light stand is very handy but not completely necessary. You could easily hang the Pizza Box Lighting Unit on the back of a high backed chair.





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Kim Anderson

Tip #7 The unofficial Santa portrait
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Millions of photos are taken each year of Santa with kids on his lap. And with the pressure of a line-up of antsy parents and their squirmy kids giving you the “hurry-up-stare”, and the professional photographers motioning for you to “move along, move along”, it is no wonder that there are so many parents leaving the mall with a photo of crying kids on Santa’s lap, or the dreaded fake smiles.

Please take this little bit of advice and capture an unofficial Santa photo. While you are waiting in line to see Santa, get your camera ready and take a few test shots. Remember, no flash! There should already be enough light set up by the photographers.

Santa will no doubt be giving the kids a hug or listening to their Christmas wishes – that’s your unofficial Santa photo! The big man will tilt his head, the kids will look shyly up at him – please, please capture that moment. The formal photo after that won’t even matter.

Photo by Rochelle Hepworth



Turn your camera to the kids’ faces and capture that moment they first see Santa, or when they make eye contact with him. It will help if you can move to the other side of the room first. Whether they laugh or cry, big eyes or happy smiles – that is the moment that will tell much of the story.

Photo by Theresa Mary Stem



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Tip #8 Beautiful Bokeh
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Yes, that's right. The word is bokeh; it's not a typo. I'll get to it in a minute.

This is a Christmas photo idea that is sure to impress everyone—mostly you. You really can do this at home. You don't need to hire a Hollywood special effects unit or have advanced picture editing skills.

Enter bokeh. Bokeh is simply a funny sounding optical term for how and why things go out of focus—usually backgrounds. If you follow a few simple rules bokeh lets you turn a string of Christmas lights into dreamy out-of-focus stars that scream holiday photo. And trust me, the kids will love this. Actually everybody loves this.

You DO need a single lens reflex camera. I know that leaves you point-and-shoot owners out in the cold on this one, but if you just come along for the ride I'm sure you're going to learn something. (And I hope it's more than just that you lust for an SLR.) I want you to know that I did try to make this work with my point-and-shoot and, well, it didn't.



Connecting your subject with the lights in the background creates a whole other effect that's quite enchanting. Photo by Kathy Murray.



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Considering how beautiful the finished product is, the how-to for this is pretty simple.

You're going to cut a little star-shaped hole into a piece of cardboard and tape it to the front of your lens. If you have several bright, hot spots in the background—hence the string of Christmas lights or Christmas tree—they magically turn into stars. That's almost all there is to it. Almost. Here are the specifics:

The choice of lens and aperture is important. The ideal lens is one that has a large aperture. If you have a 50mm with an aperture of f2 that's perfect. If you have a zoom lens you need to use the largest aperture you can—that's the smallest number—and zoom in as much as possible. (With any zoom lens, the more you zoom in the more the background goes out of focus and that's what we're looking for.

The best way to control the aperture would be to use manual or aperture priority exposure and get the lowest f-stop number. It's probably something like f3.5 or f2.8.

Because you're going to be shooting through a little hole things are going to get much dimmer in the camera; it makes sense, right? It's a good idea to make your camera more sensitive to light by turning up your ISO. I shot this picture at ISO 1200.

I cut my star-shaped hole in an index card. Lots of people use black paper for this but my experiments convinced me that wasn't necessary.

I actually did quite a bit of experimenting with the size of the star. In the end, the right sized heart for my lens was about the size of a penny. I had the Christmas lights on when I was experimenting and that proved to be a valuable time saver.



The hole you cut in the card and place on your lens can be something more ornate than a star. Even a little snowflake hole produces a beautiful image.

Photo by Beth Thomander



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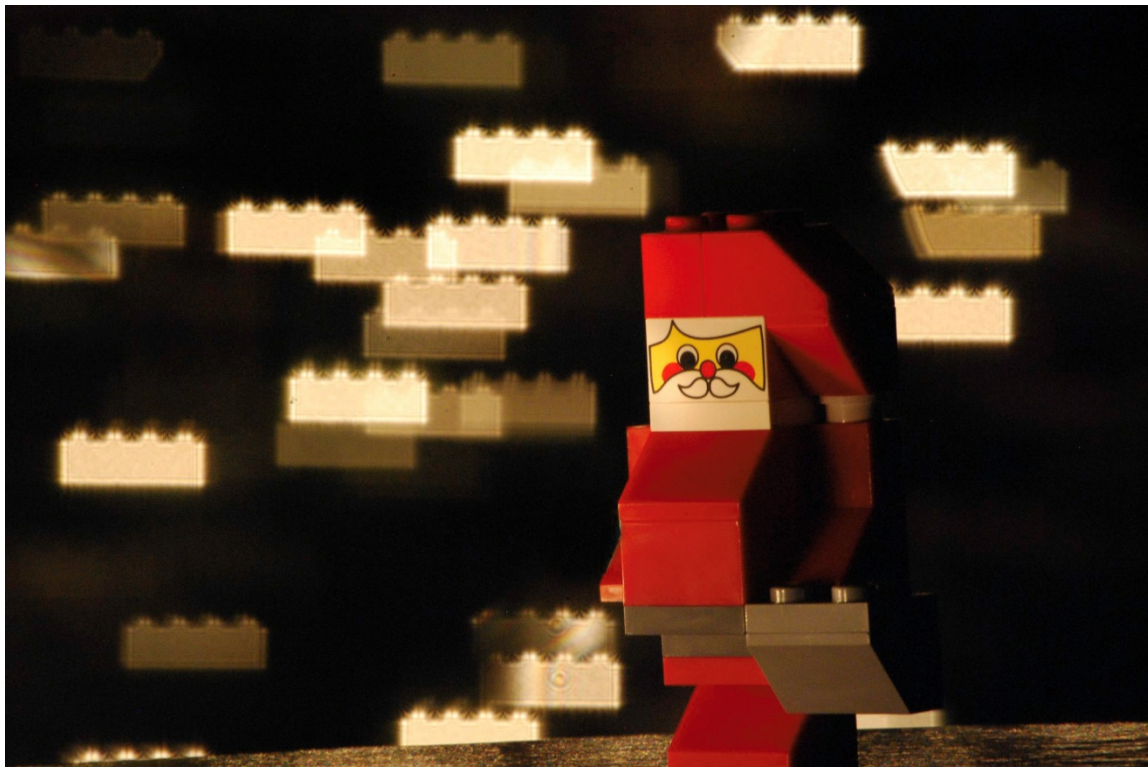
You certainly could make a beautiful photo out of the lights alone, but I wanted to get Teddy into the picture and that was just a bit trickier.

In the picture you see here, Teddy is about five or six feet from the Christmas tree—this is important—the camera is about 2 feet from Teddy. The closer I got to Teddy the more the background went out-of-focus resulting in the dramatic star effect.

You will need to put some light on your subject, too. I just put a regular desk lamp next to Teddy and it worked fine. It might be worth your while to put a Teddy bear or a doll into the picture so you can experiment before you ask your squirmy kid to cooperate. It's always nice to have the kinks worked out before you go for the real thing.

The thing that's going to amaze you the most about this process is that you can actually take a picture through that little hole. This is one of those wonderful moments when the laws of optics can actually be your friends and you don't have to think too much.

Merry Bokeh to all and to all a good Bokeh!



Yup, that's right, a holey card cut in the shape of a Lego produces a Lego Light. I challenge you to find an eight-year-old boy who doesn't think this is the coolest picture of Santa he's ever seen.

Photo by Bunnie Cleland



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Tip #9 Shoot raw
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If you haven't given yourself the gift of shooting raw yet, Christmas would be a wonderful and logical time to do it. Photography at Christmas entails a whole lot of dark rooms and bright lights and white snow. There is a good chance that you will end up with a photo that is either underexposed (too dark) or overexposed (too light) at some time. Or a mixture of the two in different parts of your photo!

The good news is that most editing software out there allows you to increase or decrease the exposure when you get to your computer. Just how successful your adjustments are depends on whether you are shooting jpeg or raw.

When you shoot in jpeg, your camera processes and compresses the picture while it is still in your camera, and discards the data not needed to make the jpeg.

When you shoot in raw, nothing is processed in camera, and every last bit of detail in the scene is preserved in the raw file.

Consider the example of the snow-covered tree above. You get back to your computer, and find that you have underexposed that tree with the snow on it. If you shot in jpeg, you will be able to lighten the overall photo. But because the camera has already determined this to be the final photo, it has discarded the detail of those small pine needles, and the wide color reflection of the lights, and the nuances of texture in the snow. So you end up with a brighter photo, but much of the detail will be lost. Plus, with every 1/3 stop of brighter exposure, you apply, the image quality will degrade.

But if you shot in raw, your photo would be saved, and with only a few adjustments, it will be properly exposed, with the option to brighten shadows and tone down highlights, and leave you with the scene you remember from that glorious night.



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I would not have been able to maintain the quality and mood of the adjusted exposure photo (top) if I had not shot the original underexposed photo (bottom) in raw. A few adjustments in Lightroom toned down the highlights so the bulbs were still glowing and not washed out, and brightened the shadows adequately.



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Mindy Chew Reese

Tip #10 Keep shooting
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When things appear to be going wrong in a photograph—by that I mean, something you don't want to happen—**things may actually be going right.**

It's perfectly natural to have a rigid idea of what you want a picture to be. Lots of great photographs are made by photographers with a preconceived vision. But it's important to let all that go of that when things unexpectedly shift in front of your camera.

Everyone thinks the kids are going to be cute and sweet when they finally make it to Santa's lap. **Not so.**

It's not a bad idea to go to a preconceived notion of what you're going to do at any given event. I like to think of those ideas as fall back positions, however. You need to keep your eyes open for the real, story-telling spontaneous moments that may at first seem at odds with what you think you need or think you want.

Real life may actually be more interesting than your idea of it—no big surprise there, right? For example, don't rule out the possibility of photographing two screaming kids just because you wish they weren't. You will have other chances to capture that smile you want—maybe not on Santa's lap—but the tears are precious, too. One day they will be worth a few laughs.

Have the good sense to keep pushing the button. Think like Santa—just go with the flow with a twinkle in your eye.



Hey, stuff happens—just ask Santa. Don't ask questions. Just keep pushing the button.

Photo by Judy Tardie



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Rochelle Hepworth

Tip #11 Keep the focus
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Christmas is cluttered. Wherever you look there are lights, people, decorations, food, colors... You will have to work hard for your images to not feel just as busy as the season! When there are too many things happening in your photo, it just becomes noise, and anything you wanted to say with your photo becomes lost.

The secret is to choose a subject and make that the strongest point of your photo. The most obvious way is to consider how your subject contrasts against the background. It does not have to dominate the photo by filling the whole frame – this ornament is fairly small, but the color pops against the icy green background. Of course, you can also zoom in and isolate your subject in the frame.

Using a shallow depth of field will focus the viewer's eye on your subject. It means your subject is sharp, while the background is blurry, and it's achieved by using a larger aperture (smaller f-stop numbers).

If you've already taken a cluttered photo, all is not lost. Try and crop out as much of the distracting elements from the sides of the photo. For anything that needs to be removed from the middle of your photo, you will have to brush up on those Photoshop skills. Point is, it really helps getting clean shots right in the camera when you take the photo!



Using color is one of the easiest ways to keep the focus on a single subject. Around Christmas, you can't really ask for more than bright red clothing set off against white snow. Photo by Toni Milak.



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Tip #12 Flash folly
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The easiest way to kill the Christmas mood is to take photos with the bright white flash on your camera. It will freeze all the action, all right, but everyone in your photo will be caught like deer in headlights, with red eyes, and harsh shadows behind them. When a flash hits those beautiful

twinkling lights on the tree, you won't even be able to tell that they are on.

There are a few ways to avoid the lifeless, washed out look this holiday season. Not using a flash at all means you need to slow your shutter speed right down, which can make it virtually impossible to handhold the camera so you'll need a tripod for a sharp photo. This is great solution for stationary objects like Christmas trees and outdoor light displays. Not so much for squirmy kids.

A flash will need to fire in order to capture action in low light situations. A simple flash reflector (some are easy homemade solutions!) can bounce your flash and spread the effects wider in the room, which will soften the light on your moving subjects. If you are lucky enough to have an external flash, try bouncing it off the walls or ceiling, which will soften the effect but still capture the action.



Turning your flash off isn't just a Christmas time photo technique. It's a photo tip that will serve you well all year long.



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Tip #13 Get creative
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This photograph was a personal peak Christmas moment for me. Here's what happened.

It was Christmas Eve and we were at my in-laws farm house. All the cousins were there. The tree was glowing in the window and I asked some of the kids if they wanted to go outside with me as I took a picture of the house from the outside. Several of them came along. As soon as I got outside I looked over the house and saw a flying object. Even before the kids could look I pointed my camera at the sky and photographed what I told them was a UFO. I was shaking with excitement. They didn't see it but I was sure I had a photograph of it. We went back inside to look.

As I turned the preview window on my camera my eyes almost fell out of my head. **It was NOT a traditional UFO—it was Santa and his sleigh and I had an actual photograph of the whole rig!** It was a little blurry—I had to shoot at a 15th of a second—but it was clearly Santa. I quickly went to grandma's computer and printed a pile of 8 x 10 prints. That took about 30 seconds. Every kid got one. Like I said this was a peak Christmas moment for me. Here's how I did it:

I copied a picture of Santa off of an old Christmas card and edited a bunch of motion blur around to make it look like he was flying. Then I edited that image into a picture I had taken of the farmhouse the previous year. There was a Christmas tree in the window just like the night we went outside.

Now I had a picture of Santa flying over the farmhouse. I simply photographed that picture right off of my computer monitor. It looked incredibly good. NOW I had a picture of Santa flying over the farmhouse IN MY CAMERA! The stage was set. This was a thing of beauty. I made the pile of 8 x 10s and counted the days till Christmas. I was downright giddy.

Try to imagine how a group of small children would react if they watch you take a picture of Santa flying over your house and then you show them that the photograph. If my experience is any indicator, they completely flip out. Their reaction was way beyond my expectations. My niece Emily was visibly shaking when she held the print in her hands. Years later she took the picture to school as evidence that the mystery man of Christmas does indeed exist.

Here's how you do it: Sometime before Christmas photograph the exterior of your house after dark. It's nice if there is a little light in the sky to give it some color but that's your call. If there are some Christmas lights in the photograph it helps. I've put my picture of Santa and his sleigh here with three different colored backgrounds. Maybe you can screen grab one, and if you have the editing skills place them over your house and create what I hope will be one magical Christmas memory.

Merry Christmas.



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You can put the tripod away for this one. In the hands of an artist a longish shutter speed and some Christmas lights creates an impressionist masterpiece. (I'm guessing a 1/8th of a second...just guessing.)

Photo by Linda Heidle





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Tip #14 Perfect Pets
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There is no reason why your pets need to be left out of the holiday festivities. After all, for many of us, our pets are as much part of the family as the kids are. OK, well maybe not as much as the kids, but hey, some days when the kids drive you bonkers...it gets close.

The principles for getting good pet portraits are very similar to getting good people portraits. You want to use natural light if at all possible. A flash, even when diffused or bounced, is very likely to startle animals. Get down to their level – we know what pets look like from above, but when you get face to face with them, you get to capture their personality.



Compose your shot entirely and make sure your settings are spot on. Then, when you are ready to take the shot, and your pet is hanging out calmly, make a noise or ring a bell to grab their attention, taking your photo right at the moment they look at you. Photo by Dawn Bassford Jackson

When in doubt, dress up the livestock I always say. And it works. It's not just dogs and cats. God loves all the animals.

Photo by Gail Schaible Kreiser



The eyes are the most important part of your photo. If your pet has a long nose (or beak, or snout!) your camera is probably going to automatically find the focus points closest to the camera, right on the tip of the nose, and if you are using a large aperture, the eyes may end up being a bit blurry. You want to make sure you focus right on the eye (or eyes) closest to you. That can usually be done easily enough by using your camera's focusing system or by changing your angle somewhat, but there might be times that you have to break out the manual focus.



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Sleepy pets are easier to photograph than excited ones (unless you have an iguana – in which case you won't notice the difference). If you have dogs, it's a good idea to actually have them run around a bit first, then settle down in front of the tree, where you can capture wonderful natural shots with their tongues hanging and tails wagging. Then, as they lie down for a rest, you can take the more contemplative shots.

Lastly, have patience. Lots of it. If you thought photographing kids was hard, it has nothing on pet photography.



Unlike kids, dogs need to be ignored a little before you take the photograph. Giving them too much attention will most likely just get them in a playful mood. Low light and dog wrestling don't mix! Photos by Sharon Rood Albright



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If you're going to dress up your pets, no time like the holidays I always say. A simple red sweater is great on dogs, but even just a red bow or red collar can make all the difference.

Photo by Matt-Christy Splechter





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Tip #15 Beautiful black and white
www.HowToPhotographYourLife.com



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It's counter intuitive for sure. Christmas is such a colorful season and to remove the reds and greens and glowing colored lights just seems like a bad idea.

But black and white is here to stay and is a good reason for it. The photographer Ted Grant summed it up best when he said "When you photograph people in color, you photograph their clothes. But when you photograph people in black and white, you photograph their souls!" (that's actually one of my all-time favorite quotes by any photographer ever.)

There's a lot of extraneous stuff that vanishes when you boil pictures down to black and white. Yes, there is a nostalgic feeling, but it's more than that.—it lets us look into people's eyes and see situations as they really are.

A black and white photograph as a Christmas gift takes the viewer and receiver of the picture right to the core of why Christmas is a time of joy and love toward all mankind.



A hint of Christmas lights in a slightly scary, foggy forest becomes a magical holiday wonderland.

Photo by Jenny Kazemba Johnson



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Elaine Neve
photography

Tip #16 Festive Portraits
www.HowToPhotographYourLife.com



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If you are still looking for a gift for someone special, you can be a hero by taking and gifting ONE good portrait of someone they love. It may be their kids, or their parents, or spouse, or maybe even a pet. It may even be themselves! Just trust me and know that it will beat out a pair of socks any day.

The most important tip is to get in close.

People really just want to see and remember what their loved ones looked like that specific December – they don't really care what the latest fashions in boots were. Let your subject fill the frame – those are the photos that pack a punch, the ones that will have an emotional impact on whoever views it.

Compose your portraits carefully. Placing them right in the middle of the frame with lots of dead space around them is a mistake. Rather, balance out the entire composition by moving your camera so that the subject is on one side (with the focal point on their eyes), and the festive background like the Christmas tree softly blurred on the other side.

As always, it's all about the light – it can make or break your portrait. If you have portable flash units, or a studio setup, no problem. But most people don't so you have to find some natural light. Before you even consider bringing a real live person into the mix, you need to find that window or door that will bathe your subject in beautiful light. At night, use lamps to get as much light to the side and in front of your subject as you can to avoid having to use a harsh flash.



Pay attention to the background of your portraits. Try to ensure that only Christmas-themed elements make it into the composition. I've seen too many beautiful portraits spoiled by a huge TV or electrical cables or an untidy stack of newspapers in the background. Get rid of the clutter (at least the ones in the photo!)

(Uncluttered!) photo by Sharon Rood Albright



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Sarah Eischen Watson

Tip #17 Relationships matter
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Relationships are what it's all about over the holidays, isn't it? It's what we seek out, the thing we miss desperately when it's not there any more. Anybody that has ever had to go through a "First Christmas without..." can attest to that fact.

Don't let another Christmas go past without you documenting the relationships that matter. Don't discriminate – every one is important, and different. Whether you choose to show off siblings, or a father and son, or your daughter and her dog, they all mean something special and will be missed when those people (and pets) are not spending Christmas with you.

The best photographs will be the natural ones. Yes, there is room for more formal portraits. But when you truly capture the interaction between your subjects, chances are that they won't even be looking at the camera. They will probably be looking at each other. And that right there is the shot that matters.



A little prop or three can be the easiest way to give your relationship portraits some personality.

Photo by Gail Schaible Kreiser



Nick Levitt's how to PHOTOGRAPH your life

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Capturing the real feelings between people means you have to keep shooting, even when the giggling starts. Actually, especially when the giggling starts.

Photo by Sarah White



Relationships happen not only between people, but also between people and their animals. Capture those too.

Photo by Jennifer Thirsk Raff



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Brenda Haijenga-Akins



Tip #18 It's in the details
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Most of the time there are no people in these pictures—at least no faces. They are the little storytellers, the little supporting actors that hold the rest of the scenery up.

They are the details that make up the memories. They are the photographs that bring back the rush of experiences gone. They are the thoughtful simple photographs that can be savored over and over again.



Jessica McIntyre



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Perhaps it's a picture of your mother's favorite Christmas ornament. May be it's a bowl of Christmas light bulbs that went out of production years ago— the ones your mother insisted on using because she refused to buy the LCD version. (She didn't like the color of the light.) It could be something as simple as a ribbon on a package tied by the hands of someone you love.

Detail shots always look good next to the big exploding action shots or portraits. To say that they play second fiddle is to demean them. Without the detail shots the big, seemingly more important pictures are vulnerable.

Only a family of photos can tell the whole story.





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Jennifer Thirsk Raff

Tip #19 Seasonal Sillies
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Naughty, silly, funny—call it what you want, there's plenty of opportunity to have fun with something as wonderful as Christmas.

Just keep your eyes open and the situations will present themselves. The gyrations and leaps and bounds that people go through at this time of year are part joyful/part ludicrous and it all seems to work every time.



It may not be silly but it's certainly different. The Christmas tree is watching you.

Photo by Kim Stacey



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Decades ago, grandma could not resist the thoughtfulness of making everyone in the family their own polka dot pajamas, complete with headgear. Little did she know that this now family classic would say more about her and the way she expressed her love and any gift she could buy at Sears Roebuck.

Photo by Jo Ann Sinclair

Only now, 45 years later am I able to laugh at the fact that my parents force-fed me oyster stew every Christmas Eve. Christmas day was my favorite day of the year because it was 364 days until the next Christmas Eve. It sounds like torture, I know, but I would love a photograph of myself sitting behind a bowl of the awful stuff. There was humor in that situation someplace; it has just taken passage of time for me to recognize it.



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Tip #20 Keep up the tradition
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It's those Christmas events that keep repeating themselves – the traditions. It could be the obvious ones like going to church on Christmas Eve or it could be the personal family experiences like the special dessert that grandma makes for Christmas dinner.

Whatever and where ever they are they deserve recording. All you need to do is imagine all the Christmas moments of your childhood that were never photographed and you will have plenty of reason to make a list of the family traditions that will happen this year and start shooting. Ask your family members for their ideas of what they would like photographed. Even if they're lousy photographers.



A reading from an old family Bible by a respected elder captures the spirit of the season and an annual family tradition all at the same time.

Photo by Kristy Wolfe



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Kim Stacey

Tip #21 Make group shots memorable
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Shooting a memorable group shot can be something as simple as pulling all the guys out into the first snowfall Dallas has seen in years. It doesn't have to be a formal, stand everyone up against the wall moment. It could very well be asking everyone to look over in your direction when they are actively involved in something else. Your subjects can be standing on the top of a ski slope or standing in line at the movies. If you keep your eyes open, group shots can develop right in front of your very eyes without the hassle of the traditional setup.

On the other hand, with a little forethought and some planning you can make the traditional gathering of the troops for the photo relatively painless for everyone. Get your settings all in place and shoot some test photographs before you put anybody in front of your camera.

I often find myself telling individuals in the picture what to do with their hands. Hands are very important. Maybe put an arm around mom's shoulder or put your hands on your hips. It can add a feeling of spontaneity and relaxation that many group shots lack.



Group shots are not always about getting the prettiest smiles in the prettiest outfits with the prettiest backgrounds. It is absolutely, every time, about WHO your living room was filled with that Christmas. It is about how you felt with all your grown kids in one room opening gifts. Group shots are all about the warm and fuzzies.

Photo by Dawn Marie Mayard



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Marcia Richardson



Tip #22 Show the scene
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It takes a certain kind of photographer to stand back and see the overall shot. It's always obvious that a wide shot was a good idea AFTER you take the picture—but not so much before.

Overall shots lay the groundwork for everything. They show people where the good stuff happened and WHERE is very important when you're telling a story. Nothing says it like the big picture.



Photo by Ava Martin



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And the big wide shots are full of little tiny details that bring back rushes of memories. You can touch a lot of bases with an overall shot; what people were wearing and furniture and individual presents are all there to be savored later.

Oftentimes, the kit lens that came with the camera doesn't shoot quite wide enough if you're trying to document the entire scene in your Christmas morning living room. Often times, I find, the second lens to buy would be a wide-angle over a telephoto zoom. Granted, both of them are really handy, but there's nothing like a wide angle lens when you need one.



Photo by Teresa Smithey



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Tip #23 Capture the chaos
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I know I'm always telling you to avoid chaos in your photos, but there are exceptions to this rule at Christmas. This year, I want you to capture the chaos, and embrace it, because it is as much part of the whole holiday season as tinsel and mistletoe.

Ultimately, your Christmas photos should tell a story, the whole story. So after you get photos of the gorgeous table setting, and the portraits of the kids in front of the tree are done, you need to fill in the blanks. Photograph the mound of wrapping paper on the living room floor. Record Mom elbow-deep in mixing stuffing. When the 2-year old has a tantrum, take a photo of the tears. And don't forget to capture your aunt's horrified expression as she watches the drama unfold!

And then, the quiet AFTER the storm is just as important to photograph as the quiet BEFORE the storm! I hope you get to take photos of those 30 minutes after gift opening when everyone is just enjoying their gifts, surrounded by empty boxes. There is a quiet peace in those moments that belie the apparent chaos surrounding it.



There is nothing pretty about chaos. But I bet that your living room floor looks exactly the same on Christmas morning, and that you are smiling about that. Point made.

Photo by Kara Johnson



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Toni Milak

Tip #24 Catch the feeling
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In all the hustle and bustle that precedes Christmas, my wish for you this year is to be able to pause, and consider what Christmas is really about. While Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus, the principles embodied in the message of peace, love and joy transcend all religious boundaries, and really comes down to understanding what is really important in life, and what is just a passing phase.

Most of what I feel about Christmas, I don't possess the skill to say in words. I hope that you can find my message in the photos I choose to post for you here. After all, I'm a photographer, and this is the way I speak best.

I hope that you can tell your own stories with your camera this Christmas.



Remember ... the joy of Christmas.

Photo by Katrina Meyers Grady



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Remember ... the enchantment of Christmas.

Photo by Renee Liddick Hall



Nick Levitt's **how to**
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Remember ... the firsts of Christmas.

Photo by Amanda Barber



Remember ... the traditions of Christmas.

Photo by Sarah Eischen Watson



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Remember ... the peace of Christmas.
Photo by Kimberly Rickard Black



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Remember ... the wonder of Christmas.

Photo by Rachel Bennett



Remember ... the love at Christmas.

Photo by Debra Pierce Bellare



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Remember ... those in our hearts at Christmas.

Photo by Shellv Green Robinson



Remember ... the spirit of Christmas can be found anywhere, anytime.

Photo by Gayle Loewen



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Tip #25 Get in the photo
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After an entire month of taking holiday photos, in how many of those are YOU actually in the photo? I'm going to guess: not many.

Your family's Christmas story is not complete without you. In these photo tips we've talked about capturing the emotions, the magic, the traditions, the people, the relationships. But without you in them, there is a very big part missing. Our kids' lives are documented to the minute these days, and they are not going to care about the extra 100 photos of them at Christmas, as much as they will treasure the 2 photos taken with you in front of the Christmas tree, or of you decorating some cookies with them, or smiling down while you place a special ornament on the tree.

Getting in the photo means you actually have to hand over your camera to someone who is probably not as good a photographer as you are. That's a big mental hurdle to overcome. It is ok if your spouse does not create bokeh as well as you. It doesn't matter that your father puts you and the kids right in the centre of the frame. Or that your friend always takes the photo with the flash on (ok, maybe you can gift her my Going Manual Course!). You were part of Christmas, and you have the photos to prove it.

Of course, if you don't have anybody to take over photography duties from you, a tripod and your camera's self-timer will save the day. Learn how to use both before the season arrives.



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Auto-exposure on
Auto-focus on
Flash off
ISO 800
50 mm lens
1/20th sec
f2.8

Lovingly hand held

And plus 1 and 1/2
exposure compensation
because the bright lights
fooled my meter



Bonus Tip: Christmas Morning!

After wedding photographs and baby portraits Christmas morning photographs may rank in third place as some of the most important—and stressful photos—family photographers will ever shoot. Almost everyone wisely eliminates the stress factor at a wedding by hiring a photographer and just about every parent can produce some decent baby portraits. (Hey, if it didn't work this time, you can always try it again after a good nap...for the baby, not you. Well, OK, you, too.)

But Christmas morning is a little different. Like a wedding it's only going to happen once, but I've never heard of ANYONE hiring a photographer to come over and photograph their kids opening gifts at 6 AM on Christmas morning. (By the way, if the kids are getting jammies for Christmas make sure they get them on Christmas Eve so they'll be wearing them in the morning photos.)

And unlike baby photography you're only going to get one chance at watching the little angels light up when they open that special present. So of all of the family events this is the one where you're really on your own and—the bad news now—it's probably the most technically challenging of them all.

Lighting is the obvious problem. If you've set the mood properly for Christmas it's going to be a little dark in your living room—you're going to have to use a flash at some point. But a flash will destroy the ambience. What to do?

You need to treat Christmas morning with children like two separate events. They are:

- Squirmy, excited children being squirmy and excited.
- Motionless, excited children being distracted and motionless.

The first one, the squirmy version, is going to require a flash. It would be irresponsible and unprofessional of me to suggest anything differently. These pictures will lack the glorious mood produced by your Christmas lights, but the flash will freeze action and produce crisp, sharp pictures that capture spontaneous, glorious facial expressions and general mayhem. These pictures are going to look snapshotty—that's the look of a direct flash—but that's OK. This is how you can preserve the wonderful moment when little Skipper opens his dream sets of Legos from Santa that cost \$129.95 with free shipping.

Then things are going to quiet down and with some practice and knowledge of how to set your camera you can turn your flash off. This is when your boy is actually putting the Lego set together with Grandpa. Grandpa will be staring blindly at the 32-page instruction manual and Skipper will be staring blindly at Grandpa waiting for him to move. If you play your cards properly these will be your mood pictures.



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The trick is to quickly, efficiently, and confidently make the transition from two different sets of camera settings.

The two sets of settings look something like this:

For snapshots of squirmy kids in dim light:

- Auto-exposure
- Auto-focus
- Flash on
- ISO 200-400

For beautiful moody pictures of kids NOT squirming in dim light try something like this:

- Use auto-exposure. You may need to get comfortable with your exposure compensation button to adjust for the camera being fooled by bright light in the picture that will result in underexposed humans. *Experiment*.
- Auto-focus should still be OK. Once again,
- Flash off. If you can't figure out how to do this check your dreaded instruction manual. If you can't find it, they're all on the internet. With the flash off you're going to get some slow shutter speeds so *experiment* holding your camera still. I would recommend using a tripod but a tripod on Christmas morning is a pain. So become a human tripod. Brace yourself, inhale, push the shutter button like you love it. Hold still.
- Put the ISO as high as your camera will allow without too much digital noise. You're going to have to *experiment* in advance. All cameras behave differently to low light levels.

Here's a really bad time to learn how
to do this—*Christmas morning*.

Please notice that I used the word *experiment* four times in the last four paragraphs.

Do all of your experimenting days in advance. Once you have your tree and lights up you can recreate what your house will look like on Christmas morning any evening.

The best way to make the transition between these two sets of camera settings is to save them in your camera—IF your camera has the option to do this. Look in your manual for something called "save settings" or "my settings". You may be able to bounce back and forth between these two different sets of settings by simply turning one little dial. It may sound easy, but still requires practice and experimentation. But if your camera can do this and you figure it out, you're going to think I'm a genius just for mentioning it.

If your camera can't do this, then you're going to need to get comfortable turning you flash off and on and readjusting your ISO.

Either way you do it, most of you are going to learn something about your camera—and your relationship with machines—by mastering this. But the key, the most important point I'm making today is this:



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HERE'S A **REALLY BAD** TIME TO LEARN HOW TO DO THIS—**CHRISTMAS MORNING**. PRACTICE AND MASTER YOUR CAMERA SETTINGS DAYS IN ADVANCE OF THE BIG SHOW.

And if you totally mess this up and you have a complete photographic disaster on your hands, please remember that in the long run, it really doesn't matter. **Enjoy yourself** and your family and have a wonderful, peaceful Christmas.

Give yourself the gift of putting your camera down. You have my permission to let a perfectly wonderful Christmas moment slide by without photographing it. Go love your family, and experience what Christmas is all about. And THEN go shoot some more pictures.

Merry Christmas, everyone.

Nick



Photo by Shannon Beagle



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Special thanks to all of you who shared your wonderful photos with us.

You can't imagine the mix of pleasure and pride we experienced as we used your examples of exactly how to do it. We were inspired by the message of Christmas joy we saw in your photos.

So please continue to [upload your holiday photos to our Christmas Photos Event](#) on our Facebook page if you'd like a chance for me to review them in my special Holiday Radio Picture Show or have them included in updates of this Christmas Tips eBook.

We're grateful that you share your families and lives with us through your photos.

Please visit our website at www.HowToPhotographYourLife.com.

Check out my online photography courses at www.howtophotographyourlife.com/courses.

Please join us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/howtophotographyourbaby

Don't worry, we're not just about babies—we'll soon be How to Photograph Your Life!

Nick Kelsh is a nationally known photographer/instructor who's been featured on Oprah and The Today Show multiple times, among other national and local media. His passion for teaching others, easy-to-understand photo tips & techniques, and inspiring, entertaining style have earned him the following of thousands on his [How To Photograph Your Life website](#), [How to Photograph Your Baby Facebook page](#) and popular [Basic Photography](#), [Going Manual](#), [Portraits and Lighting](#), and [Photo Editing](#) online courses.