

THROUGH AND THROUGH

By Amanda Quintenz-Fiedler

An image of a child can be captured in a gleeful moment of laughter, the sudden onset of a pout or a mischievous grin before jumping into a puddle of mud. What's amazing—and trying—about photographing children is that all of those personality traits can emerge from the same child within a matter of moments. The ability to recognize that those moments are all precious, instead of looking for the starched-white, forced smile, is something that Tamara Lackey has used to become a tremendously successful and well respected children's photographer. She sees the whole child. She makes connections.

Lackey came into photography after a stint as a corporate consultant helping companies find better ways to do business. During the few years she was in the corporate world, she not only learned how to be a shrewd businesswoman, but how to observe and work to help companies evolve. Moreover, she recognized that her true gift was for communicating with people. When she did shift to pursuing photography as a career in 2002, Lackey focused on that strength and capturing it in photographs. "My talent remained in the kind of communications and conversations I was having all the time," she explains. "It was just finding a way to translate that into technical excellence to have an end product that I felt made sense, and was a worthy and genuine record of the conversations I was having."

While she evolved technically, she was finding the moments and expressions from her photo subjects that her competition wasn't getting. For Lackey, the most important element of the image is the gamut of facial looks you can get from a subject—a philosophy of child photography that wasn't very common at the time. "When I first came into the industry, the vast majority of children's portraiture was traditional," she says. "Since that time, the pendulum has swung quite a bit toward being

more contemporary."

Lackey has shared her style and approach in her book, *The Art of Children's Portrait Photography*, and a DVD, *Inside Contemporary Children's Photography*, both of which were dedicated to helping photographers connect with their young subjects and move away from the stoic and stodgy traditional portraiture of the past. Her goal, which she shares in her work, book and DVD, is to capture the whole child. "What I've seen is this big swing of everybody around me shooting a lot of the style that is very focused on what I think is expression. It's less so about perfection and more about expression."

Yet merely capturing a great expression is only half the battle. That's why Lackey studied photography very seriously to better her technical approach, so that her final images would not only have the brilliance of one shining and real moment, but also the exposure, focus, depth of field and crispness of an exquisite photograph. It's a balance that she has worked hard to attain, and one that she wishes more of her contemporaries would heed. "What I'd like to see is people recognizing that you don't throw out everything that you learned with traditional photography—which means great emphasis on lighting and thinking strategically about posing," she explains. "It's not like you're going to bend every little finger in place, because you'll lose expression, but it's about modifying yourself to make sure that you're posing your subject well."

In her imagery, Lackey makes the prospect of children's photography seem easy. But she has worked hard for years to find the best ways to communicate with children and their parents to make the most of her photo shoots and truly get a set of images that depict the real personality of each kid. One of the most important elements may seem obvious, but takes years of practice or natural talent to achieve: truly engaging with the subject.





That is a talent that Lackey has in spades. “I find that there’s certainly less work involved for me when a child is easily no longer lens-aware and we’re just communicating. That’s the easiest job in the world for me. No matter what mood they’re in or how they’re feeling, if I can take away the notion that ‘Hey, I’m trying to get a photograph, I get the kid.’” When dealing with kids, however, Lackey’s approach isn’t one she can implement without coming to an agreement with the parents.

Before a camera even meets her eye, Lackey sits the parents down and reminds them that they need to trust her to get the images they hired her to photograph. If they want the images, they need to let her work her magic. She explains to the parents, “We’re not in the business of raising moral human beings for the next two hours,” she admits with a boisterous laugh. “Let’s raise the restrictions, let’s not put anything on them, recognize that I am ‘in charge,’ relinquish that to me and also recognize that my methods have zero discipline. If [your kids] are going to knock me over or throw sand at me or call me a stinky name in silliness, we are going to let that go.”

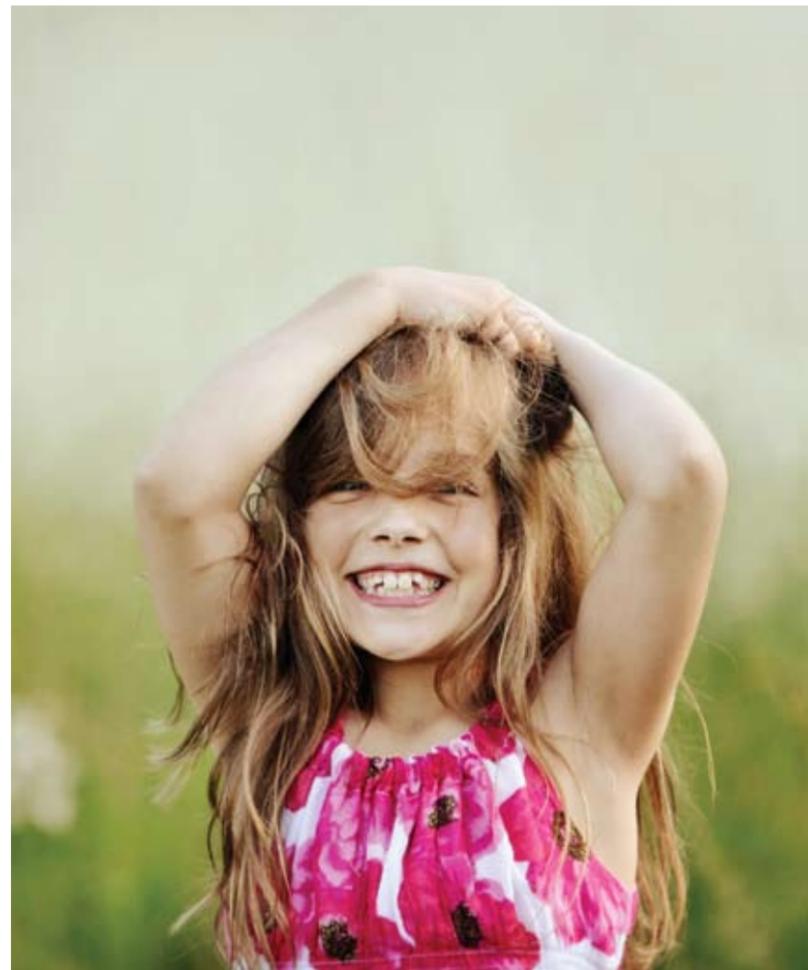
The result is children at play, having fun and connecting with Lackey. True, some of the images might be of pouts or temper tantrums, but that’s the span of a real experience with a child—with any human being. No one, including a child, has a limited and one-dimensional personality. What Lackey’s methods and style allow her to do is capture everything, the full experience of that child, in that moment, at that age.

To complete the process in the designated timeframe requires not only Lackey’s dedication and skill, but an understanding of the child she is about to photograph. “To me, the idea of knowing what I’m walking into just shortcuts all the stuff that’s going to get in the way of us getting to the place that I want to go,” she says. “It begins with me having some information about the child already, having a fair idea of who he or she is and how they might behave for the next





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two hours. Not who they are all the way, but who they are going to be for me.” But again, Lackey has that ability to meet children and read them, to go beyond the information on paper.

It is Lackey’s business savvy that has spurred her continued rise in the industry, from lecturer and workshop-runner to international destination portrait-shooter and sought-after creative. It’s also this talent that encouraged her to branch out and diversify her business, even though it didn’t go as planned right away. In the nine years she has been a dedicated full-time photographer, Lackey has expanded her studio to include two additional shooters, a studio manager, a graphic designer and marketer, a production assistant and a video production team with a business development manager and a production assistant.

Lackey easily embraced social media with Twitter and Facebook and became a personable face to the company she worked so hard to create. Her clients hire her because they like her work and they like her, and Lackey has always been very forthcoming with who she is. When she utilizes social media marketing techniques, she isn’t dressing up as a character that she hopes will bring in business—she is being herself. “I’m no different on Twitter, on Facebook or when



I’m rolling into a shoot,” she admits. With Lackey, you get what you see, or read in tweets and blogs, or watch on DVD. She is an earnest, honest, fun-loving professional who has mastered her art.

Her continued interest in pursuing social connections led her to create a series of videos called *Redefine*—to be aired on CreativeLive.com—and earned her the role as host of WPPI U in Atlanta. In both programs, either Lackey herself or individuals with whom she has connected are sharing their beliefs and experiences about keeping your passion, balancing

work and life, and making the most of your business.

Still, despite her fervent commitment to educating, it’s clear that Lackey has what you can’t teach: the type of open affect that makes you want to be her friend, and a reassuring demeanor that makes you feel as though you already are. 

Amanda Quintenz-Fiedler received a Master of Fine Arts in Photography degree from Brooks Institute. She continues to create fine art images, teach photography and write regular contributions for publications such as Digital Photo Pro, Rangefinder and Photographer’s Forum. Her photographic work can be viewed at www.amandaquintenz.com/.