

Tips for taking the best family portraits

As the holidays approach, it's important to focus on the best photography tips to make the most of your family portrait.

1. Invest in quality camera equipment.

Digital photography has brought the world of photography to the masses, and high-quality digital cameras can be purchased new or used at reasonable prices. For family portraits, make sure the camera has a timer so you can be a part of the picture.

2. Scope out the best locations and background for the shoot. Think outside the family fireplace to create interesting indoor backdrops for family photos - but avoid mirrors and windows that can create issues by reflecting light. If choosing an outdoor location, make sure it is free from distraction. Like indoor shots, intricate patterns or background commotion can distract from the subject of the photo - in this case, your family.

3. Consider the best time for taking photos with your family. Natural lighting is great for family photos, particularly the golden hour - the first and last hour of sunlight during each day. If this isn't convenient for your family, choose a time when any children involved in the picture are well rested and more apt to patiently pose for photos.

4. Take lots of shots, but remember



that the best expressions with children are often the first ones. Group photos are challenging, considering the number of people who must smile and look their best at the same time. Chances are you'll have several photos with eye-blinking subjects and wiggly children. To increase your odds of getting the best family portrait, take as many photos as possible and vary the compo-

sition to get different angles and arrangements.
5. Plan ahead if including a furry friend in your family portraits. Many people view their pets as members of the family, so it's only fitting that you might want to include your beloved pet in a family portrait. If so, choose a time when the pet is naturally calmer. Also, bring treats to hold the pet's attention. (BPT)

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Protect what matters this holiday season

The winter holiday season is here, which means we can look forward to a lot of decorating, parties and possibly some travel during the next few months. But with all the hustle and bustle of shopping and celebrating, it's important not to lose sight of what matters most: the safety of your family and home.

From now until New Year's, you'll be expecting guests more frequently and your house will be filled with beautiful, but highly flammable, decorations. These range from the candles on your dining room table to the tree in your living room to the paper decorations on your walls. All of these items can contribute to potentially unsafe conditions in your home.

To keep your family and house safe and still enjoy all the festivities, keep in mind these simple precautions:

- 1. Always make sure burning candles are never left unattended (blow them out if you leave the room) and are placed at least 12 inches away from flammable objects. Candleholders should be sturdy and placed on a stable, uncluttered surface.
- 2. Make sure to check your smoke alarms monthly. They should be installed in every bedroom, outside each separate sleeping

area, and on every level of your house. Replace the batteries in all of your smoke alarms at least once a year.

- 3. The holidays also mean travel for some families, and it's important to make sure your house is safe while you're away. Consider a home security and automation system that offers comprehensive protection inside and out, such as ADT Pulse. This innovative, customizable system allows you to control your lights, lock your doors, adjust your thermostats and watch your pets from wherever you happen to be via a computer or smartphone.

- 4. Make sure your decorations are safe. Only use items that are flame resistant or flame retardant, and avoid placing them near doorways or windows.

- 5. Have your chimney cleaned and inspected every year by a qualified professional. Make sure to use a fireplace screen to contain any sparks or hot embers. Once you put the fire out, let ashes cool, and then transfer them to a metal container with a lid. This should be kept at a safe distance from your house.

With the help of some common-sense safety precautions and a good security system, you'll be able to enjoy all the fun and festivities

of the holiday season, whether you're hosting or traveling. (BPT)



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Seven ways to save money on holiday travel

Here are a few ideas that can help you keep money in your pocket and thoughts of peace and happiness in your mind:

■ **Book early:** Whether it's purchasing your flight, hotel or rental car, the holidays are one time that it really pays to beat the rush. As space on flights and hotels becomes scarce, you're not likely to find a very good deal closer to your travel date.

■ **Compare your options:** Use travel sites like Orbitz, Travelocity, Hotels.com and Expedia to find the best prices on flights, hotel rooms and rental cars. Expand your searches to include nearby airports as well, as you may find savings at smaller airports in the surrounding areas. Travel sites may also be able to offer discounts when you book your hotel and rental car at the same time as your flight.

■ **Look for coupons and deals:** Sites like FatWallet.com or Ebates.com aggregate the best deals from the top travel sites and airlines and feature increased cash back rewards during special fall and holiday promotions. Don't just settle for the best price you find on your first search - see if you can apply other coupons and rewards to bring costs down even further.



■ **Travel during the week:** If you have the flexibility, booking your travel as far away from the holiday itself and away from the surrounding weekends can potentially save you a lot of cash. Try a date range search on your favorite travel site to see which days offer the best prices for travel.

■ **Sign up for alerts:** Many travel sites also offer the opportunity to sign up for low price alerts for the destination of your preference. You can also sign up for daily emails from

coupon sites. But don't wait too long for the best deal, especially around the holidays - be ready to purchase as soon as you see the right price as it might not be there for long.

■ **Pay attention to luggage fees:** Decide ahead of time how much luggage you will bring and factor luggage fees as you price out plane tickets. If your family plans on checking multiple bags, you may want to pay just a bit extra for tickets from an airline that allows you to check some bags for free. Shopping online for gifts and having them sent directly to your destination can help lighten your load whether you are flying or driving.

■ **Consider all hotel options:** It might be possible to find a deal at a hotel that usually serves business travelers rather than a more family-oriented hotel. If you're just looking for a place to put your head down for the night, this could be a great option.

By looking in the right places and planning ahead, you can save a considerable amount of money on holiday travel, allowing you to spend more on activities or gifts for your loved ones - or simply put your savings in the bank to use on next year's trip. (BPT)



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How to take the hassle out of holiday travel

Before you utter 'bah humbug,' consider some easy planning tips that can help ease the stress of traveling during the holiday season.

■ 1. Gift wisely

The holidays and presents go together like milk and cookies, but lugging around boxes of gifts takes up a lot of space and there is a chance that they may become damaged in transit. Whether you're traveling by plane, train or automobile, consider shopping online and having the gifts shipped directly to your destination, which doesn't cost any extra. If the idea of shipping gifts just doesn't jingle your bell, consider compact gifts - such as gift cards - that take up little travel space and can be kept closely in a purse or carry-on. If you simply must bring boxes of toys, clothes and other goodies, package them securely and wrap them when you arrive at your final destination. Keep in mind that if you're flying and the security alarm goes off and you have wrapped gifts, you will be asked to open them for inspection.

■ 2. Create a home away from home

While piling up on grandma and grandpa may be an option, sometimes it's nice to have some space where your own family can settle in and unwind when the festivities aren't in full



swing. Consider choosing a hotel that offers comfortable accommodations that everyone will enjoy. Extended-stay hotels like Home2 Suites by Hilton are a great option because they offer generous rooms where the entire family can relax and feel merry. Accommodations include kitchens which can help cut down on meal costs, plus you can cook your famous side dish and bring it to the holiday feast. With pet-friendly accommodations, and freebies like daily continental breakfast and Wi-Fi, the whole family will feel at home.

■ 3. Avoid peak travel days

If you plan to fly, try to avoid weekends or days immediately prior to or after major holidays. You'll pay the premium to fly out on Christmas Eve, plus you're more likely to encounter long terminal lines and delayed flights. If you plan to drive to your destination, these high-travel days will likely clog the roadways. If you have the time to take off of work, travel at least several days before or after a holiday. Then settle in and enjoy quality time as you get in the holiday spirit.

■ 4. Practice patience

Whether you're stuck in traffic, standing in the long lines at the mall, or waiting for that 30-pound turkey to roast, you need to practice patience. Prepare by bringing along some reading material for yourself and some fun holiday activities for the kids. Books, magazines, small board games, cards, video games, movies or simply singing some holiday carols can help bide time and keep everyone in an optimistic holiday mood. These simple steps can help make holiday travel a breeze so you can enjoy more time with your family and less time stressed. With planning, traveling during the holidays can be a memorable event. (BPT)

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