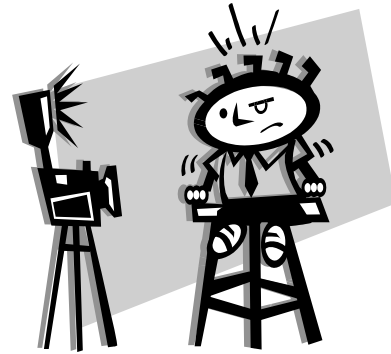# Photographing People

Jim Elvey

Taking photographs is for some a profession, a serious hobby or even an art form. For most of us though it is simply the means of capturing memorable moments or scenes. This love of "happy snaps" has been fuelled by affordable digital cameras that allow us to snap away uninhibited by film and processing costs as we once were.

A little reading and some practice can bring a lot of satisfaction to this common activity and dramatically improve the quality of your photographs.

With the focus (sorry!) on people photographs, the following pointers will get you thinking about the critical elements of a good photograph. Paying attention to these elements will produce a pleasing improvement to your photographs.

First and foremost, *know your camera*. Surprise yourself - **read** the manual and **practice** the features that interest you. Beyond that, keep these points in mind:

Posing - Try taking a few candid photos of your subject(s) at work/play/rest. Or try some more casual poses. The results will be more interesting. Take notice of magazine photos and think about which poses appeal to you and why. But don't get too *Cecil B. deMille* - an artificial pose looks, well, *artificial*.

Framing - Think about how close or distant you should take the photo from the subject. A close up shot (top-of-head to mid-neck) can be much more interesting and will certainly capture expression better. (Zoom if you can, as a camera in the face is a bit invasive.) Sometimes setting the subject off-centre and/or with their shoulders angled away or head turned will add interest.

Framing sports photos is especially tricky. You have probably taken long shots of team sports only to find the subjects are too distant to recognise. You will note all the shots in newspapers are close up to emphasise the action. We hobbyists can rarely achieve that with normal cameras, so either don't try or lower your expectations. Of course you might get lucky if the action comes your way.

Background - This is really an aspect of framing but warrants special attention. If you can, move the subject, or your vantage point, to avoid bright, overly busy or otherwise distracting backgrounds. Especially avoid strong vertical lines immediately behind the subject.

Children - Take the photo from their eye level. The result will be much more engaging. Work quickly and/or keep the subject(s) interested.

Focus - If your subject is central, this is rarely a problem, but if off-centre, your camera may focus on the background. Remedy this by centering the subject in the viewfinder and then pressing the shutter button halfway down. Continue holding the button halfway down while you frame the photo to your satisfaction then press the button all the way down to take the picture. (Check your manual - your camera may have a feature to solve this problem.)

Resolution - Generally you should keep your camera set on its highest or near-highest resolution particularly now that memory cards are so cheap. This will produce the sharpest images and also allow "cropping" (trimming off unwanted background). An exception is when you want to only ever view the photo electronically and/or email it to friends. Even then, your computer will very likely have facilities for "downgrading" resolution for this purpose.

Lighting - While lighting is often the hardest thing to control, at least learn its effects. While you can create great effects with lighting, it can also spoil a photo by casting harsh shadows or, if overly bright, washing away features or causing squinting. (Don't face your subjects into the sun on a bright day unless their eyes are shaded.) Look for and avoid these effects. The best lighting is natural light on an overcast day.

Flash - The *Lighting* comments apply here too. Be aware that flash at too close a range will often over expose your photo leaving everything looking a little washed out. And too far away won't provide enough light. Experiment! You might get a better result by stepping back a metre and either zooming in or simply cropping the resulting photo. And try using a flash in combination with natural light, even outdoors, to lighten shadows.

Groups - Group photos will benefit from a little stage management. Don't have everyone at the same eye level - have some sitting or use props like ladders or steps to arrange your subjects. Sometimes a higher or lower vantage point produces a good effect. Groups will nearly always look better if they are "bunched up" a little. Take a few photos because there are bound to be some blinks and strange expressions.

Blur - Moving subjects can be a problem as they may appear blurred. Try to get the moving objects coming at you or passing at an angle to reduce the motion effect. You may be able to manually increase the shutter speed or select an action setting on your camera to counter this problem. A more common cause of blurring is camera shake. Pressing the shutter button can cause the camera to move at the critical moment. Be careful to hold the camera steady and press the shutter button in a slow, smooth action.

By now, you will realise that a lot of success in photography comes from being aware of the elements of a good photograph.

Knowing those elements - especially lighting, framing and posing - will equip you well to assess the conditions you are dealing with and the options at your disposal.

You will also find you are not only taking better photographs, but also enjoying the process more. And you will be very likely producing publication quality shots. In fact, if you have a favourite, send it to us with some comments on how you took it, who is in it etc. and we will try to publish it.

Send your comments and suggestions to news@meredithnews.com.au