

# confessions of a family historian

EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT  
DOCUMENTING FAMILY LIFE



## DSLR

From aperture settings to white balance. You'll get all of my tips on shooting with your DSLR.

## IPHONE

I'll tell you about apps I love, how to shoot for creativity and where to print + make books.

## VIDEO

You'll even learn the basics of recording and creating family films.

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Who am I and how did I get here? A bit of background information on my photography journey.



DSLR tips, how to shoot, settings, aperture, white balance, etc.



iPhone photography, printing and creating books.



Simple how-to overview, editing software and quick tips.



Wrap up and "homework" assignments. Because we all love homework.





# WHO AM I ANYWAY?

I'm Melissa Gibson, a hobbyist photographer and filmmaker. I married my high school sweetheart in 1998 and we have 4 girls from preschool to high school. I use a Nikon d810 and prime lenses 50% of the time. I say that because the other 50% I'm using my iPhone. Whatever it takes to document my life, I'm using it. Thank you for purchasing this eBook. I hope that you will find my words meaningful, inspiring, and educational.





# HOW DID I GET HERE?

**I grew up here in the south and can't get enough of this place.** As a kid of the 70s and 80s, there aren't as many pictures of my life as there are of my girls' lives. I don't have mounds of pictures from childhood parties. I mean, of course there were parties; they just weren't documented the way they are now. In those days, we literally had to beg our parents to use some of that film on us. Film was expensive! Today, we just \*clickclickclick\* our DSLRs. Those film cameras? They had to see something really worthy before pressing the shutter. It's for that reason alone that there aren't as many pictures of me as there are of my own girls.

Back then we were busy LIVING the good life and now we are busy living the good life AND trying to document it all. At least I am.



**"I WANT THEM TO REMEMBER THEIR SISTER'S LAUGHTER."**

**That's where my journey starts, really.** That is why I take pictures and video of pretty much every single thing; because, like many of you, I want to remember. I don't want to leave it up to my girls to remember it all on their own. I want to remember more of it, too. My four girls need to have something to pass on to their children. Silly stories, videos, pictures. I'm not talking about images; I'm talking about physical pictures to hold in their little growing hands

So, that's pretty much how I got to where I am today. I document my girls' lives so that they have memories later on. I want them to remember their sisters' laughter, the times of love, the silly moments and the way they play in the backyard. I want to remember their shoulder dimples. How the littlest one grips that crayon so tightly. When she grabbed hold of that sheep and rode with all of her might at the state fair. How they each have a certain style already. Being a remember-er. Not missing a thing. That is what is important to me. I want that to be important to them as well.

**"THIS IS IMPORTANT TO THEM, TOO"**



I BOUGHT MY FIRST DSLR ABOUT 11 YEARS AGO. IT WAS A ROCKIN NIKON D40, WHICH WAS PROBABLY THE MOST BASIC DLSR OUT THERE AT THE TIME. A FEW YEARS LATER, I BEGAN UPGRADING EVERY FEW YEARS. FROM D40 TO D90 TO D700. IT WAS DURING MY TIME WITH THE D90 THAT I REALIZED THERE WERE OTHER LETTERS ON THAT DIAL BESIDES AUTO. I WANTED MORE FROM MY PHOTOGRAPHY SO I BEGAN TAKING ONLINE COURSES AND IMMERSING MYSELF INTO LEARNING ALL I COULD ABOUT MANUAL MODE, COMPOSITION, LIGHTING, ETC.

AFTER MANY, MANY YEARS OF STUDYING, PRACTICING, COURSES AND READING, I EVENTUALLY FOUND MY GROOVE AND WAS FINALLY PROUD TO SHOW MY PHOTOS ONLINE, IN CONTESTS AND ON MY WALLS.



# MY EQUIPMENT



NIKON d810 + FUJI X-T2



35 1.4 / 50 1.4 / 105 2.8 /  
24-120 / 23 1.4 (FUJI) / 18-55  
(FUJI)



IPHONE X + SUPER WIDE  
ANGLE OLLOCLIP



LIGHTROOM + PHOTOSHOP  
+ ADOBE PREMIERE PRO

# HOW DO I SHOOT?

**With my DSLR, I use a 35 1.4 nearly all of the time.** I adore the prime lenses because I like moving myself and getting close enough to interact with the girls. I am constantly moving all over when I'm playing and photographing them, so zooming with my feet is just natural. Also, I shoot wide open 99% of the time and I am attracted to these lenses because they do enable me to shoot as wide as 1.4.



# HOW DO I METER + FOCUS + SET WHITE BALANCE?



**I spot meter off of the skin, always.** In cases where I am shooting in a backlit situation, I will meter off of her skin and then bump up the exposure by 1.5 – 2 stops. Since I have too many kids, getting the shot as close to perfect as I can is very important to me because I don't have too much time to edit. It's a challenge that I love to take on. Therefore, getting correct exposure on my girls' skin is the highest on my list. Do I mind blown backgrounds? Not in the least. However, blown skin or clothing or important story elements is most certainly something to avoid. I will definitely choose a blown background if it means that the skin tone and story features are nicely done.

**My settings for focus;** I don't use back button focus. Never could get the hang of it honestly, although I only tried it twice. For about 3 minutes each time. As far as focusing, I go with AF-Single. I toggle my focus point. Choosing my point of focus is a huge part of my storytelling and I've become quite quick at moving the points around in order to keep from losing the shot. My thumb is muy rapido, folks. When I see what's going on in the scene, I decide then what is important to me (hands, a drawing, a toy, her face), compose the shot, toggle to where I want focus to land, and shoot. Next, I'll pull back and get more of the scene. Or, I'll get the full scene and then decide what detail I want to show off. (We will talk about this more later)



**Choosing white balance using the Kelvin method.** What I do? Is I just think of that 5500 number and a normal, sunny type day. Starting at 5500 and rolling to a lower number, the image is going to have a cooler temperature. The lower you go? The bluer it gets. Let's say you start at 5500 and roll to a higher number; in that case, the image is going to become warmer. The higher you go? The more orange it will be. It's a bit like fire, I guess. The hotter the temp number, the more golden and hot the fire will be. The lower the number, there is less fire and more coolness. Make sense? If I'm outside on a sunny day, I start with 5500. Inside by a window or open door, a always at 5200.

**But what if I'm shooting inside at night?** Perhaps I'm taking some snaps of my girl playing on the iPad. In that case, I am going to forget about the fire analogy and start low right off the bat. I'm more than likely going to begin at 3000 or so, chimp and adjust. Also, when you are shooting in a low-light situation, you'll need to meter off of the skin, always. Look for that brightest area of the face or body and meter there.

**TIP:** You can use the open palm of your own hand to meter before calling your subject over. Be sure to hold your hand in the same lighting your subject will be in. Just remember, open PALM, not back of the hand.

## white balance temperature by kelvin

SUNRISE / SUNSET 2500-2800K

LAMPLIGHT INCANDESCENT 2800-4000K

TWILIGHT 4000-5500K

DAYLIGHT / SUNNY 5500-6200K

OVERCAST / CLOUDY 6200-7000K

SHADE 7000-9000K

DEEP SHADE 9000+K

# ADDITIONAL WHITE BALANCE OPTIONS

CAMERA PRESETS labeled shade, cloudy, daylight, etc.

AUTO works well indoors in natural light; so-so outdoors.

GRAY CARD sets a custom white balance; very accurate

EXPODISC similar to gray card; very accurate







## Shooting wide is a great way to show off the little things.

**Shooting with a super wide aperture (2.2 and under) is tricky,** but it is a beautiful way to eliminate distractions and pull the eye right to your subject or details. This is one reason why toggling focus points is necessary. As mentioned earlier, when I see a detail I want to remember, I compose the shot, then toggle over to the detail, press to focus and take the shot.



**A few other things for you to keep in mind:**

**Concentrate on only ONE subject.** Since grabbing focus when shooting wide open takes a bit of practice, you'll be more successful if you choose one thing to bring out. Perhaps that's a sweet hand, or his cute shoes. If you choose to photograph a portrait at a relatively wide aperture, make sure it's a single subject. As a general rule, your aperture should be a tad higher than the amount of subjects you have. For example, one person would be 1.4-1.8. Two subjects would be 2.0-2.8 and so on.

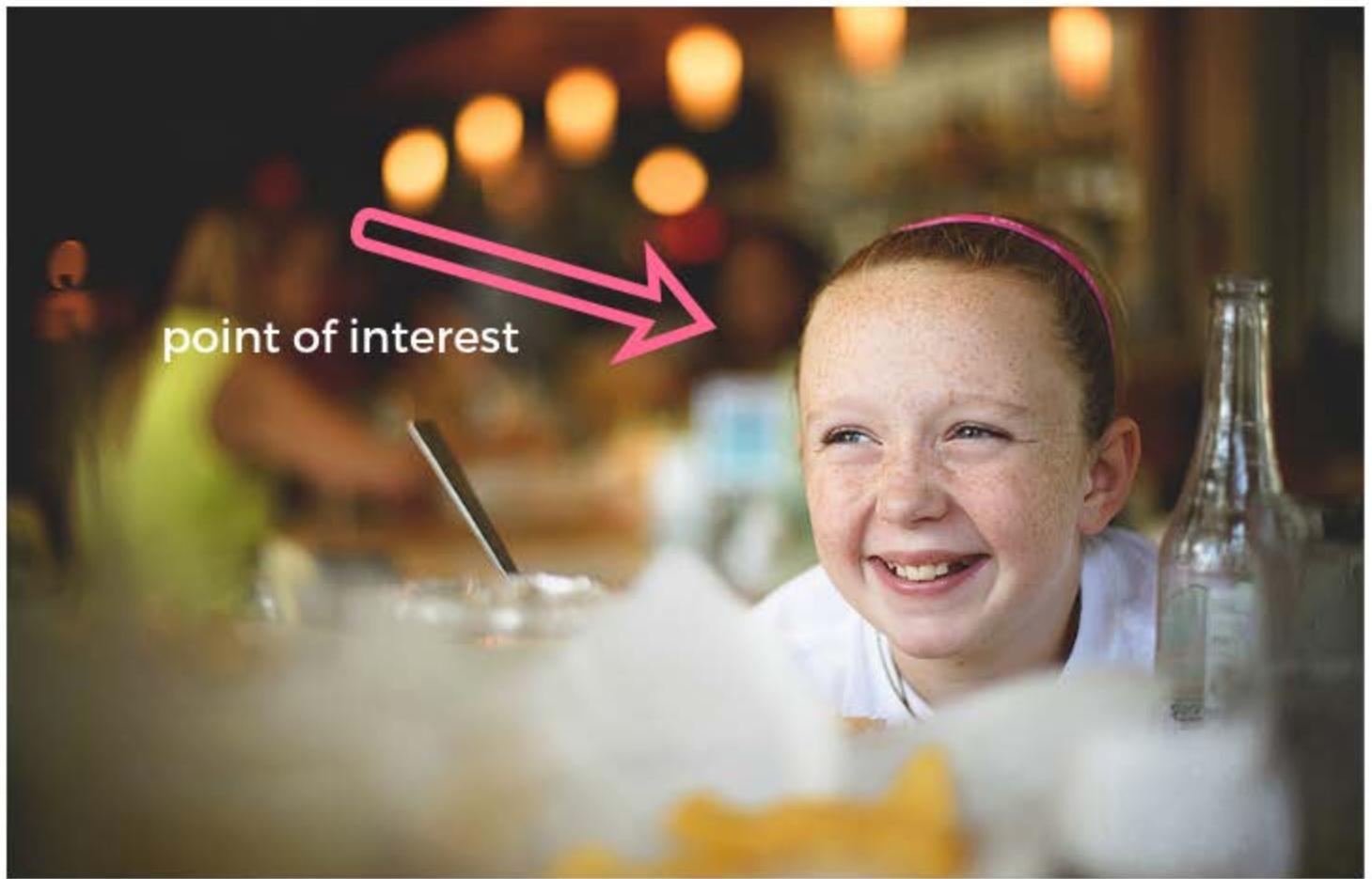


**Be mindful of your distance from the subject.** Not only does your aperture affect the amount that's in focus, your distance from the subject does as well. Being at 2.0 and 5 feet from the subject equals more in focus than if you were at 2.0 and 2 feet from your subject. The farther the distance, the more in focus; no matter your aperture choice. That means, you can photograph a group of, let's say, 3 people side by side with an aperture of 3.4 if you're relatively close to them. OR, you can back up and photograph them at 2.0 because more distance = more in focus anyway.

**Make a bokeh sandwich.** Yes, of course that's a real thing. A great way to pull the viewer's eye right to your intended subject? Creating a small slice of focus right in the center or just below center. An easy way to achieve this look is to lie down and leave space at the bottom of your frame. Or you could squat down or even rest your camera on a tabletop. Any way you do it, just leave space at the bottom and shoot wide. Also, keep composition in mind and place your subject along the points of interest. That way, you have **bokeh + subject along point of interest + bokeh again**. You'll get more information on the rule of thirds in a bit. Below are some examples showing the subject along the point of interest.



# bokeh sandwich



# mom's eye view

Shooting from above is probably my favorite perspective. Perhaps because that's the way I always see them? From shots of their little faces looking up at you, to details of toys, hands and feet; this may turn out to be your favorite angle, too. There are a few things you should consider when choosing this perspective.

**You'll want to use a relatively wide angle lens;** at least a 35, but, a 50 works well if you're on a stool. **Be sure not to cut off important details of the story;** feet, hands, toys, etc. **This is a great perspective to show off balance** (colorful shoe on one side + colorful toy on the other. **It's also the perfect angle for center compositions.**

# above







## kid's eye view

Actually? Maybe this angle is my favorite? It's certainly often overlooked because, well, we're not kids. Squatting down low and shooting up will give your viewer a scene they often don't see and it **shows a fantastic new relationship between the subjects**. Photographing a 2 year old at a low angle on the beach makes her look as though she owns the place.

Photographing her final time in the highchair at this vantage point shows just how big she is; however, shooting down on this scene would make her feel small (not my intention this time). **Photographing from a low angle with a wide angle lens accentuates subjects**, making them more interesting. Lie down or put your camera on the ground and shoot up.

# below





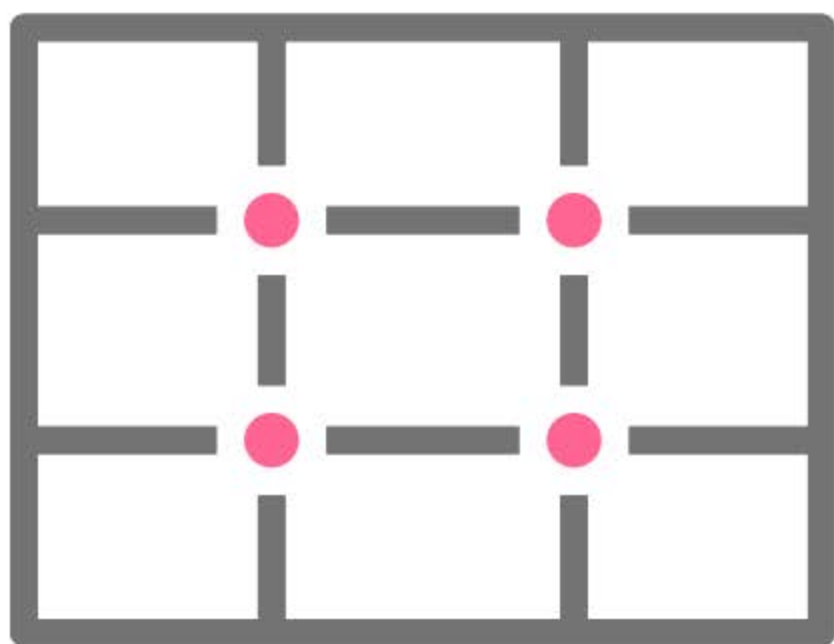


# composition

The Rule of Thirds is a classic guideline in photography and is basically dividing the frame into a tic-tac-toe board. The idea is to line up your subject at the intersecting points. Or, place your subject along the lines. The subject doesn't have to line up perfectly, just make sure they are relatively close. **If you're photographing landscapes, for example, you'd put the horizon line along the bottom ROT grid line.**

Photographing a portrait means you'll position both eyes along a horizontal line. If only one eye is in the photo, place it at an intersecting point. You can also place your subject to the right side with one eye at an intersection. **Another thing to remember is that we naturally "read" an image from left to right; therefore, place the most interesting part of your subject on the right with negative space on the left.** That said? Rules are meant to be broken. Once you're comfy with the ROT, start deliberately breaking that guideline. My favorite way to break the rule? Put the main subject right in the center! Also, look for framing (doorways or any objects, really (note the bokeh sandwich photo where she's framed by a straw and a glass!)), leading lines and symmetry in your images.

## rule of thirds

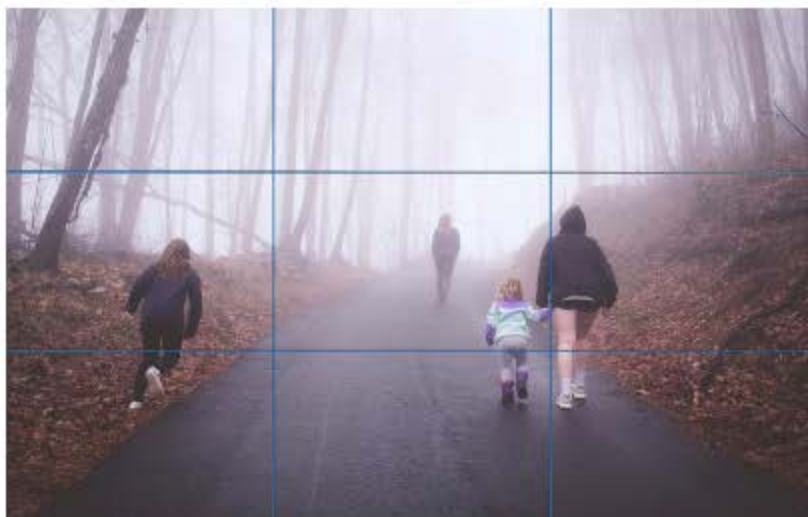
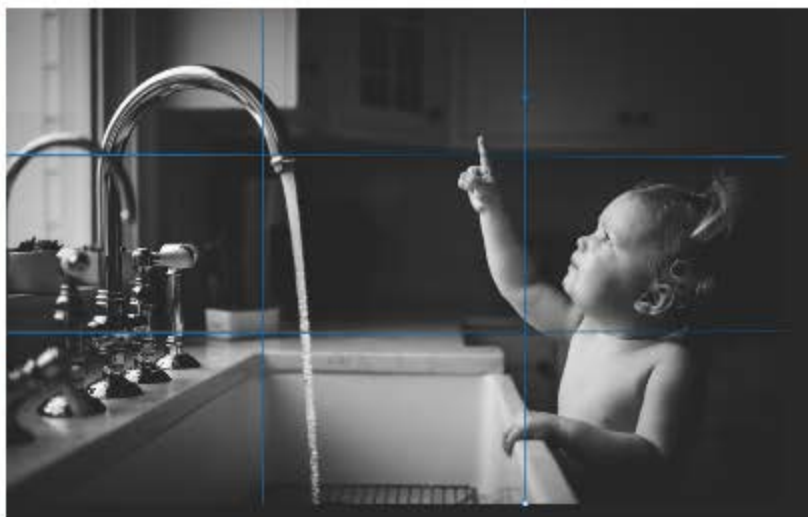


## TIP

When photographing people walking, running, bikes, cars, etc., place them on the left side of the horizon. That way, they are walking "through" the image as we read left to right.

Lastly, watch the edges of your frame! **Eliminate anything along the edges that pull the viewer's eye away from your intended subject.**





**tell the viewer  
what you WANT  
them to see**

**YOU ARE IN  
CHARGE OF  
EVERYTHING IN  
THE FRAME.**







You can frame your subject within doorways, windows, objects, lines, and even other people.



# WHAT LENS SHOULD YOU CHOOSE?

HOW DO DIFFERENT LENSES AFFECT YOUR STORY?

## 24mm (24-120 or FUJI 23)

Fantastic for street photography + landscapes + environmental portraits (child playing or parent cooking). Keep important elements along the center to prevent distortion. Keep the depth of field shallow.

## 35mm

Excellent for documentation; most like the human perspective; What you see through the viewfinder is what you'll get. Don't get too close for portraits due to slight distortion, but nice for wider portraits. Shooting with a wide aperture gives a cinematic look.

## 50mm

Very versatile and creates beautiful portraits. Wide aperture sharply isolates the subject against a shallow depth of field. Great first lens and reasonably priced. Can be used as a macro lens by using a reverse mounting ring.

## 105mm

Excellent choice for very detailed shots. Creates lovely portraits. Has 1:1 magnification. Very fun lens!







24mm



**35mm**





50mm



**105mm**



# additional DSLR tips



Know what lens you will use before you leave the house. Think about where you're going and if there will be detail shots or mostly wide open spaces.



When shooting at home, leave your camera in a place so that it is easily accessible. Mine is on top of the dryer shelf, right next to the main room in our home. I can grab it quickly when at home and it's a nice reminder when I see it on the way out.



Always have a full battery and clean card in the camera. It's a good idea to have a back up battery charged and ready.



You are remembering FOR the children so get down on their level. Shoot from the ground, spend some time lying on their bedroom floor to see what they see. Photograph what they love, too, not just what you love about them.



Photograph their toys, their loveys, their bookbags, anything that is personal to them.



Remember to shoot wide in order to capture the details that are easily forgotten. I like to take a shot of the scene, move in closer and then move in even closer for details.



**MIND THE FRAME!** Take 20 seconds to clean the frame before shooting rather than 20 minutes cloning in post. I'd rather spend time with the girls than sit and edit images that could have easily been cleaned before the shot.

# iphone photography

There are some days when you just don't want to lug around a bulky camera and on those days just pull out that iphone! **You can get some fantastic shots with your phone.** And? I'm going to tell you some great ways you can easily print photos right from your phone. You can also make really cute books without ever thinking about it. It's completely automated!

The main thing I want you to remember about mobile photography? **Treat your phone just the same as you do your DSLR.** Shoot the same, show the same perspectives, and do your best to edit the same. **A camera is a camera and it shouldn't change your style.** (repeat that back to yourself. Daily.) You should be showing YOU through the images no matter what device you are using. Don't let your iPhone talk you into putting out lazy snapshots simply because it's "a phone". Shoot the same, edit the same, and rock it no matter the device.



**One of the first things you should do is turn on the Rule of Thirds grid.** That way, you can easily compose a shot using this basic compositional rule. Do this by going to Settings > photos and camera. Also, try turning on your flash on bright, sunny days. That quick burst of light will remove harsh shadows from your subject's face. It's a nice little handy surprise! Make sure you're within a few feet of your subject, otherwise it's useless.

Also, you can hold your finger on the image to lock focus, then slide your finger up or down to adjust the exposure. **This is how you get great silhouette shots.** Squat down low, aim high, tap + hold + slide your finger to adjust the exposure -- making sure the sun is behind your subject!





## when should you use your phone?

**I choose to use the iPhone in situations where I know I don't want to stress over white balance.** Outings where I know it will be tricky and I don't even want to try it. I'd rather spend the moments with my girls instead. For example, I would rather use my phone at the beach. My girls absolutely love the beach and I wouldn't want to turn that time together into something crummy for them just because I was fiddling with getting "the shot". I just don't want my girls to remember that huge camera around my neck when they look back on our fun time together. It's too crowded, too crazy and just too fun. I want to BE THERE with my family. If your kids are anything like mine, they are much more excited and willing to work with my iPhone sometimes. Other times I DO take my DSLR; however, I'll take a couple of money shots and then put it away for the rest of the time. Only pulling out my phone to document from then on.



One major benefit of using the iPhone is being able to see the light differently and then turn around and use that new found light with the DSLR. Y'all, it is AMAZING what you can see through that phone. Things you won't often notice; light, framing, composition are all so much more clear when you don't have a huge camera in front of your face. I've often used my iPhone to search for light, then pull out the DSLR to take the shot. For some reason, that little LCD on the phone shows me what I need to see right then and there. It's like a pre-test to the real exam.



Documenting the moment isn't stressful when you're using your phone. You don't have to worry about perfect white balance or shutter speed or if you've chosen the right lens for the situation. It's JUST an iPhone and it's doing the job I want it to do right then and there. However this doesn't mean I snap-n-go. I plan, look for compositional elements and light. A memory is a memory, but it sure does look better when you seek out nice storytelling aspects rather just pointing and shooting. Remember, although using your phone is simple? **Don't let the images become simple.** Keep your style, compositions, editing, etc. just the same as you would with your DSLR.







# favorite photo apps



**CHATBOOKS:** connect to your IG or FB and automatically create a softcover book that is delivered to your door every month. \$10 each and completely worth it to me! It's an easy way to digitally scrapbook your life. MY FAVORITE!



**COLLECT:** an easy to use digital photo journal that will remind you to take one photo each day. Each month you've got a beautiful calendar grid of memories.



**HANDY PHOTO:** Remove distractions from your iphone shots so very easily!



**FRAMEMAGIC:** mounds of free collages to use on social media or your chatbooks.



**FACETUNE:** I love this editing app for its ease of use and options.

# even more photo apps



**LIGHTROOM:** there's so much that can be done within Lr mobile. From spot healing to matte filters. I love playing around with this one.



**ONE SECOND EVERYDAY (ISE):** small monthly fee, but so worth it! If you'd like to make family movies with daily clips, but don't have the energy to work with DSLR video? This is the way to go! There's a 14 day free trial that I'm certain will have you hooked. This one is a keeper!



**QUICKSHOT:** another photo editing app. This one has really fun filters and overlays. Quickshot has quickly become a favorite of mine.



**PRINT STUDIO:** great prices, all sorts of print sizes (even tiny!) nice quality and fast shipping. From magnets to stickers to metal prints. This is where I print all of my phone photos.



**SNAPSEED:** free photo editing app that is free and has fantastic features!





# videography tips

**My favorite lens to use for family films is the 35.**

The lens is very close to our natural view of life; wide enough with a bit of peripheral along the sides. Also, the 35 has a very smooth focus, which is what you'll need for films.

- Use a prime lens. and pan slowly.

- Do not shoot wider than 2.8. There's too much out of focus for the story to make sense.

- Manual focus ALWAYS since pressing the shutter to focus will create noise as you're recording.

- Treat each "story" as a movie scene with a clear beginning, middle and end. Meaning, if you're documenting him brushing his teeth, you'll have an opening scene (pan across/down/up of the entire scene), a middle (move in closer on details), and an ending (pan away or blur out).

- Keep the same editing style as your stills.

- Keep the clips short! No more than 7 seconds. You don't want to sift through long clips.

- Do not stop recording in the middle of sentences/giggles/etc. Let the child finish so that you have full moments to use.

- Keep a steady hand. Nobody likes to watch a shaky film. Use your body to stabilize yourself/place the camera on a tabletop.

- Edit clips in Lr for consistency, create film in iMovie or Premiere Pro. Choose music without words.



# homework

(Did you think I forgot?)



- Choose an item (toy) to shoot all week. Pick your f-stop wisely and remember how it affects the story you are telling for your child.
- Use your iPhone for silhouette shots. Get down low and aim high. Tap + adjust exposure.
- Photograph a scene from a Mom's Eye View. Then, get low and photograph the same scene from a Kid's Eye View
- Using a nonliving item as your main subject, practice changing your aperture to see how it affects the story.
- Experiment with the ROT grid, concentrating on making the main ideas fall along the lines or at the intersecting points of the grid.



# Finally...

BE YOU!! Don't try to copy that mom who shoots \*this way\* or \*that way\*. Don't stress out trying to be the photographer that has a big social media following. Don't shoot one way because you think that's what people want. Photograph what YOU want and how YOU want to document your life. Don't waste time trying to be someone you're not. Live your life, photograph what you love, and you'll have a gorgeous documentation of a life well-lived. And well-loved.

