
HOW FAMILY PORTRAITS BOOST YOUR CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM

by Chris Cummins - June 17, 2015



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One of the hidden but powerful aspects of family photography that moms and most photographers rarely consider is how it can help us raise children with stronger confidence in their own worth and abilities. Psychologists and experts have done some work in recent decades exploring the link.

A revealing study was conducted in 1975 with a group of fourth graders at a Tennessee school by Tulane University. During a five week period, the children took Polaroid instant photos of themselves with provided cameras in a variety of assigned poses, compositions and expressing various emotions. The children worked with the printed images of themselves and created scrapbooks once a week over those five weeks. Testing of the students and teachers at the conclusion of study revealed a significant increase of 37 percent in the students' average self-esteem behaviors. This Murfreesboro Study shows some evidence personal photography of children seen and enjoyed in a specific way can help boost a child's self-esteem.

But how can family photography, specifically family portraits, help boost a child's self-esteem?

David Krauss, a licensed psychologist from Cleveland, Ohio says, "I think it is really important to show a family as a family unit. It is so helpful for children to see themselves as a valued and important part of that family unit. A photographer's job is to create and make the image look like a safe holding space for kids where they are safe and protected. Kids get it on a really simple level."

Krauss is one of the earliest pioneers in using people's personal photography and family albums to assist in mental health counseling and therapy. He co-authored "Photo Therapy and Mental Health" in 1983 that is considered a founding text for the use of photography in therapy.

"It lets children learn who they are and where they fit," says Judy Weiser, a psychologist, art therapist and author based in Vancouver. "They learn their genealogy and the the uniqueness of their own family and its story. When a child sees a family portrait with them included in the photograph they say to themselves: 'These people have me as part of what they are, that's why I belong here. This is where I come from.'"

Weiser has spent more than 20 years using all manner of personal photography to assist in the treatment process of her clients. She is considered by many to be the foremost authority on these treatment techniques, called PhotoTherapy.



When It Comes To Having The Greatest Positive Impact For Your Child, Which is Better, Digital Images or Paper Prints?

Obviously, rather than print and display family photographs, families are increasingly enjoying their images in a digital form, be it a mobile device, a laptop, or simply on social media. But does an image on a tablet, computer screen or social media site have the same impact for helping families boost a child’s self-esteem?

“My bias is very simple. I think they (family photographs) should be on the wall,” says Krauss.

“I am very conservative about self-esteem and I think placing a family photo someplace in the home where the child can see it every day without having to turn on a device or click around on a computer to find it really hits home for that child this sense of reassurance and comfort. They have a certainty about them and a protecting quality that nurtures a child. It let’s them know where they are in the pecking order and that they are loved and cared for,” says Krauss.

The importance of printed photographs displayed in your living space was echoed by other experts.

“My personal and clinical bias is there is something very powerful in touching your fingers to an actual print,” says Craig Steinberg, a licensed psychologist who works with children ages five through 13 near Eugene, Ore. “Touching the photograph where a face is smiling or the shoulders, it is the same thing as touching a book when you read it. There’s a lot of stimulation of the brain when you have that sensory experience. That is a bit lost in the move to digital. You are touching a keyboard, mouse or a touchscreen but you are not touching the image.”

“Displaying photos prominently in the home sends the message that our family and those in it are important to one another, and we honor the memories we have experienced,” says Cathy Lander-Goldberg, a licensed clinical social worker and a professional photographer in St. Louis, Missouri and the director of Photo Explorations, which offers workshops to girls and women using portrait and journaling for self-reflection.

Additionally, Krauss recommends having photographs of that child with their family placed in the child’s bedroom so it can be among the last things they see before sleep and the first thing they may see before beginning their day.

“It says we love you and care about you. You’re important.”