



Newborn Art - Working with Babies 3 Weeks Old and Younger

by Jennifer Turner, Cr. Photog.

The biggest question I get when people see my newborn work, is "how do you get them to look so peaceful?" My answer is simple...patience, well that and a lot of experience.

Newborns are unique to photograph because of their "newness" which is also one of the reasons I love working with them so much. I photographed my first newborn session (and by that I mean a baby under 2 weeks old) 5 years ago. He was 5 days old and I really didn't know what to do with him so I just played as much as possible. I curled him up in a huge bowl, tried to position him on suitcases, curled him in blankets and, of course, posed with mom and dad. He slept soundly, which I quickly learned was not always the "norm". I was in LOVE! I just love working with these tiny little treasures, they are beautiful to me. At the time I began photographing them, no one else in our area was advertising working with babies this small, the norm was still 3 months for a "newborn" session, so people really thought it was odd, which I loved. It took a while to convince people to let me photograph them before they were "cute and smiley" but once I started working with these images as "art" and not so much "portraits", that all changed.



In the beginning I would work for hours some times to get them to sleep, my biggest pet peeve was seeing newborns almost asleep, or frowning...I wanted total peace when they were photographed. A HUGE turning point in my work was the discover of the book "Happiest Baby on the Block" (you can find a link to Amazon to buy the book and/or video in the photographers area of my website). This book explains the psyche of a newborn, how they react to things, what they need to calm themselves, and what upsets them. It was such an amazing help that I can't say enough about it. I have 3 children of my own and thought myself an expert already, this book showed me so many things I wish I had known when I was having my own babies! I now loan my books out to my clients who dont have it and sometimes give it as a gift to our clients who are expecting.

I have taken much of what I have learned from Dr. Karp's book and melded it together with what I need to do in my sessions to create the peaceful, serene look I want. I'm going to share a few of my favorite tips here:



1. Take your time: I know that there are teachings out there on how to quickly photograph a newborn, but I disagree with that approach. Parents can go anywhere to have their baby photographed quickly, what makes an impact is that parent seeing you take your time with their baby, it creates a trust that will quickly create loyalty. I also feel that unless you get one of those "gumby" like babies who sleep from the minute they get there, rushing thru a session will not get you the peaceful results that really create art for these parents. Remember, people spend a lot of money on art, less on "pictures".

2. Create the Atmosphere: A warm room is great, free of drafts, but you do not have to have it 90 degrees in there. Many babies do not like rooms that are extreme in their temperatures, so ask the parents ahead of time if they keep their home warm or cool.

A safe place to photograph that is also comfortable to you is important if you are going to spend an hour trying to get a baby to sleep. I work on a "Newborn Center" that is approx 32" high, I am very often bent over the baby shushing them and patting them, having them off the ground allows me to do that without too much back strain. Because I am working up off of the floor we have a rule in my studio, no one walks away from the baby even if they are asleep. The baby is always within hands reach of me and if I have to step out, I have the parents lay their hand ON the baby and they are not allowed to remove it until I get back. Baby's can jump, pretty high actually, when they are startled and although I have never had one make it to the edge, I'm not about to take that chance.



3. "The Calm" - a common assumption is that baby's don't like loud sounds or movement, it can wake them up. The reality is that baby's react to abrupt changes in their environment. If the house is silent and you speak, it startles them. If there is consistent "normal" sound, they are less likely to jump at the sound of your voice. If a baby is laying asleep and you touch them, they can also startle because it was an abrupt change. Because of that, I take the baby as soon as the parent gets there and begin to acclimate them to me and the environment in my studio. I talk to them and to the parents, in a normal tone consistently. I am patting them, rocking them, walking and "messaging" with them all of the time. By the time they are laying down for the session, they are used to my voice and my touch so that when I pose them, it does not startle them. "Shushing" in their ear is also helpful, it create "white noise" that is similar to what they hear in the womb. White noise machines can be helpful as well.

Another tip here is to have the parents bring their own blankets to cuddle baby in while you try and get them to sleep. I don't have mom try and get them sleeping because

normally they think its time to eat if moms holding them. Instead, I wrap them in their blanket that smells like mom and then I get them to sleep. This makes it much easier for me to pose them and lay them down and they tend to settle faster when they can smell their moms scent. Remember, newborns sense of smell is approximately 200 times stronger than our, it's their primary way of recognizing their parents in their first weeks of life.

4. Give them time once they are asleep - I know this sounds like the first tip, but its so important to me, I wanted to cover it more fully.

If they are still moving, or frowning, let them get into a deeper sleep. You can still pose them, but then wait a bit for them to relax in their pose before you fire the camera. This will also give you a better chance to get a peaceful look in that shot because they may frown again after the flash fires if you are shooting strobes. This is probably the most important tip I can give you, take your time! I know you want to fire that camera as soon as they close their eyes, but wait a bit. Once they are completely asleep, you have a much better chance of getting multiple poses that all look serene and peaceful.



5. Don't forget the details - Even if you are photographing an environmental style of portrait, remember the details. The tiny features these babies have are what will change most dramatically. Don't forget to zoom in on the hands and feet, ears, lips etc, it only takes a minute and can be the parents favorites for years to come (trust me, my children are 14, 18 & 23 years old...I miss their tiny hands and feet!).

This is just a tiny smattering of information and tips on working with these precious little babies, but its enough to really begin to set apart your images from lesser experienced photographers. Don't rush, enjoy this session and get to know your clients during them as well. The tighter the relationship with the client, the less likely they are to "photographer hop". With our economy and the influx of new photographers, I believe its trust and relationships that will keep people in business!

Jennifer will be teaching at Texas School of Professional Photography in 2010. She will have in-depth education on working with newborns during her class including working with the babies, lighting, posing with parents, siblings and alone, environmental work, retouching & finished art pieces. Her class will include information on running a successful children's photography studio. You can register at www.tppa.org. You can also watch for her other speaking engagements & workshops as well as instructional CDs & offerings on her website at www.jenniferturner.net.