# Blurring Background Tutorial
By Hummie

Often, a background of a photo is busy and distracting to the focal point of the photo. Keeping the subjects in focus and blurring the background is an effective way to not only eliminate the distracting background, but also to create depth of field.

Here is my photo of my sons which, at the time, posing them in front of the re-enactors camp seemed a great idea. However, I had no idea that the photo would turn out so cute and I now feel the background takes the eye away from the boys. In addition, there is a lady in a chair in the background. I could crop her out, but there are some instances in photos where this is not possible.

I duplicated the photo layer to make several working layers while one is kept safe in case of errors.
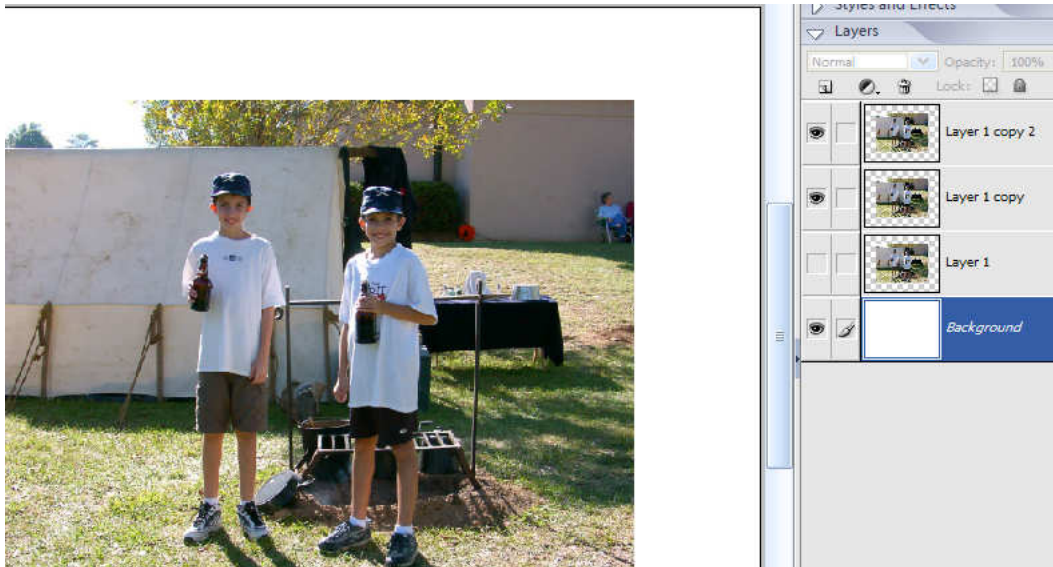
The goal in order to blur the background is to extract the subjects from the photo to put them on their own layer, while leaving the original complete layer beneath to blur.

If the background is to be blurred only slightly, I would suggest that the extraction does not need to be as clean as in other techniques. However, there are times when a clean extraction is necessary and, therefore, I would suggest following my Extraction Tutorial or the masking techniques in my Color Isolation Tutorial.

For the purposes of this tutorial, the magnetic lasso tool will be used for a much quicker extraction. It is always nice to have more than one way to achieve the same goal in Photoshop Elements. In that way, each person can utilize the technique which he or she is most comfortable with .

The magnetic lasso tool automatically detects the edges of an object as you hold down the mouse to move the cursor around the edges of an object. It automatically puts down stops, but when turning sharper or more difficult areas, click with the mouse to manually insert a stop.
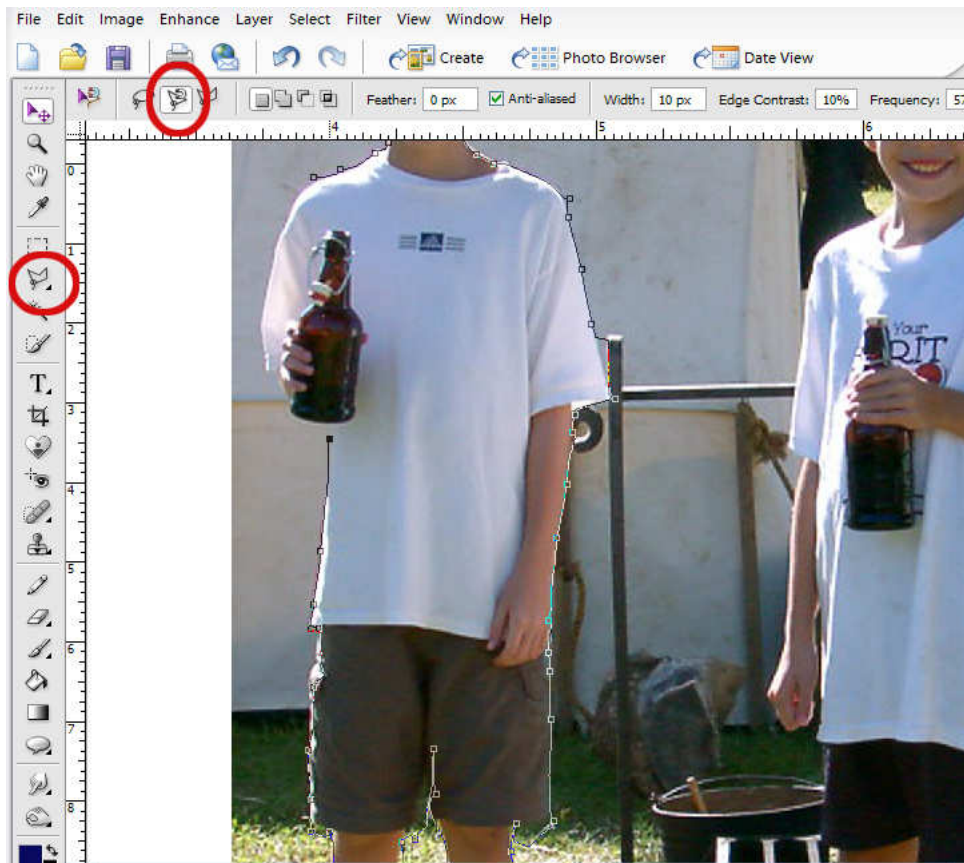
Although the magnetic lasso tool does a fairly good job, it does make errors in its detections. In my sample below, it picked up the line of the pole, rather than the shirt.

To fix the errors made with the magnetic lasso tool, activate the brush selection tool. Hold down the mouse and drag on the areas that need to be included in the selection that were not in the original selection. Hold down the <u>alt key</u> while dragging with the mouse to subtract those areas of the selection which should not be included.

If needed, quickly switch to the "mask" mode to spot any areas which need to be cleaned up. Go back to the Selection mode to clean up the area.

Once the selection is satisfactory, with the original photo layer as the active layer, hit Control + J on the keyboard to copy the selection onto a new layer. If need be, make a few tests using black or white layers beneath and touch up with the eraser as in the Extraction Tutorial.

In my photo, it was necessary to go back and make a second selection of the other son and follow the same steps as above.
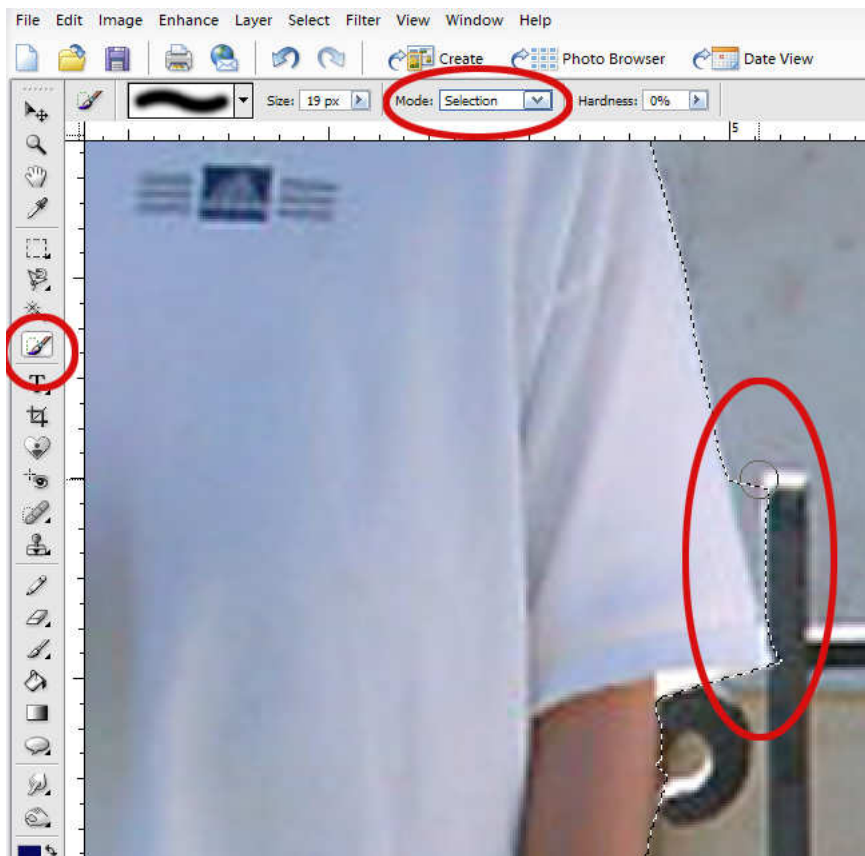
Now it is time to play! I love playing! With the original photo layer as the active layer, bring up the Gaussian Blur popup box located under the Filter drop down menu.

As can be seen in my sample below, to obtain a depth of field similar to that which is obtained in a camera, use a radius on the lower end of the scale. I used 5. My sons are not in clear focus and the background is slightly out of focus.
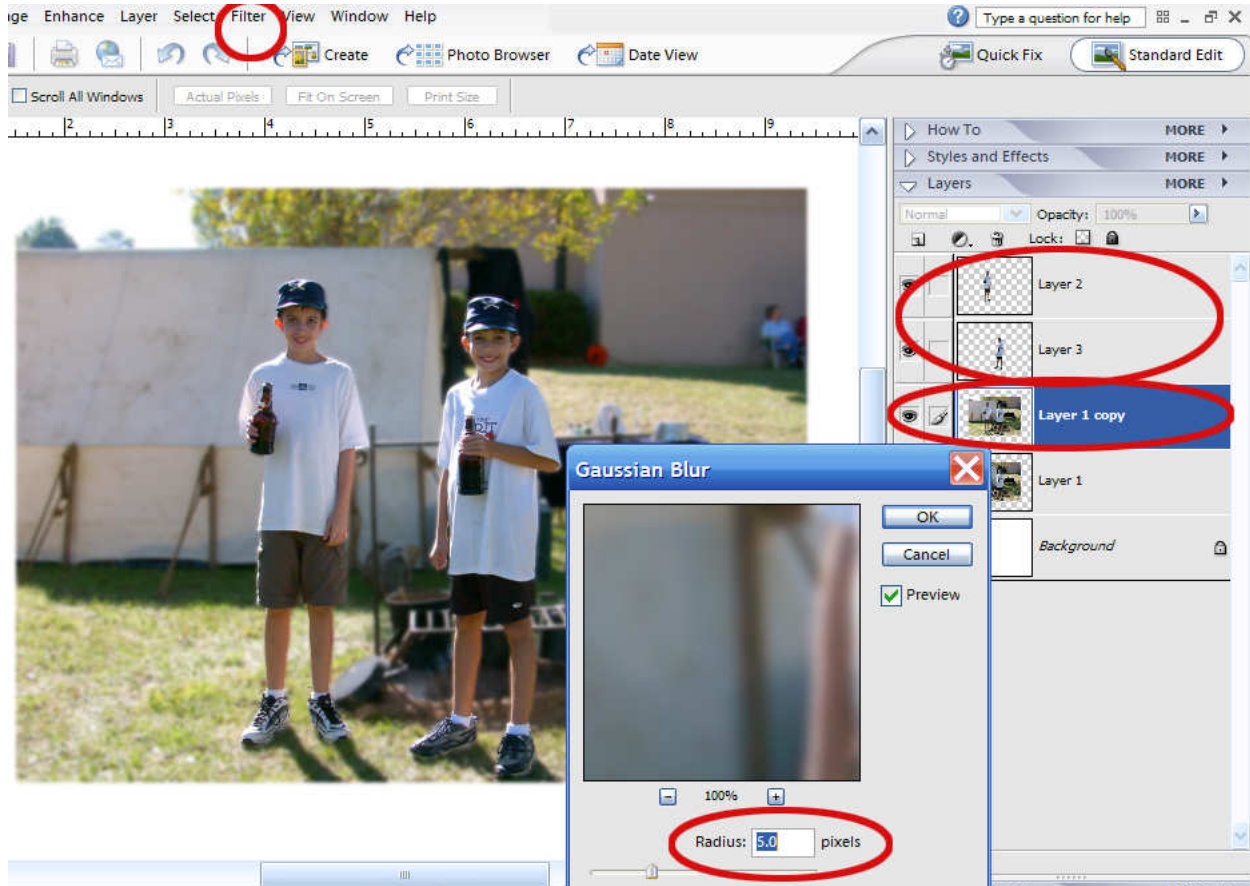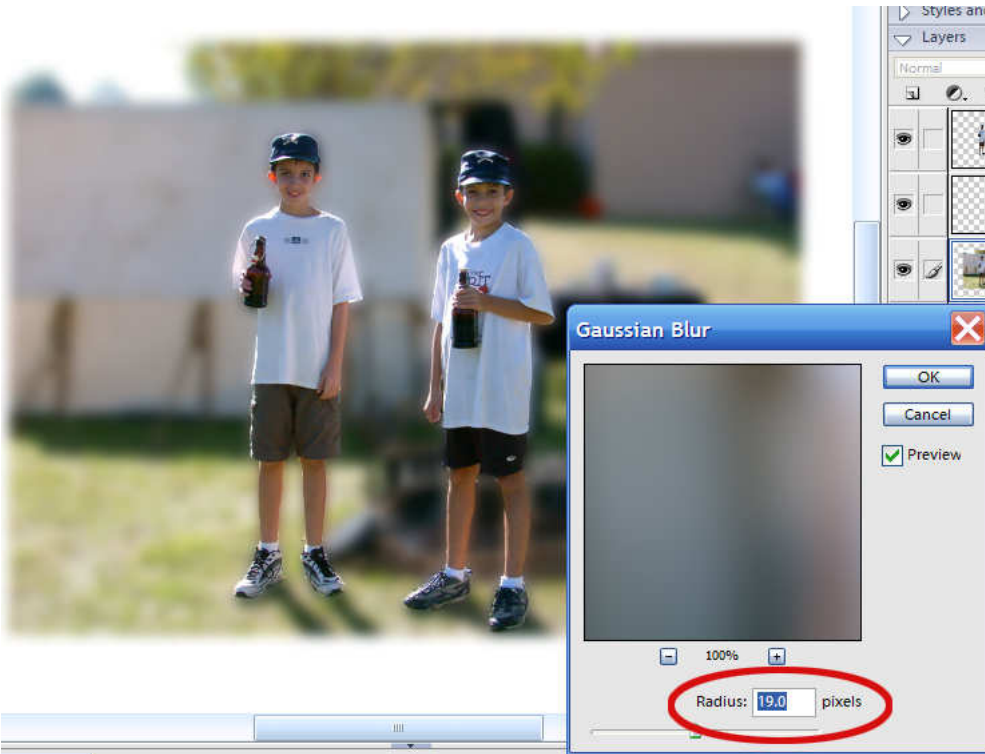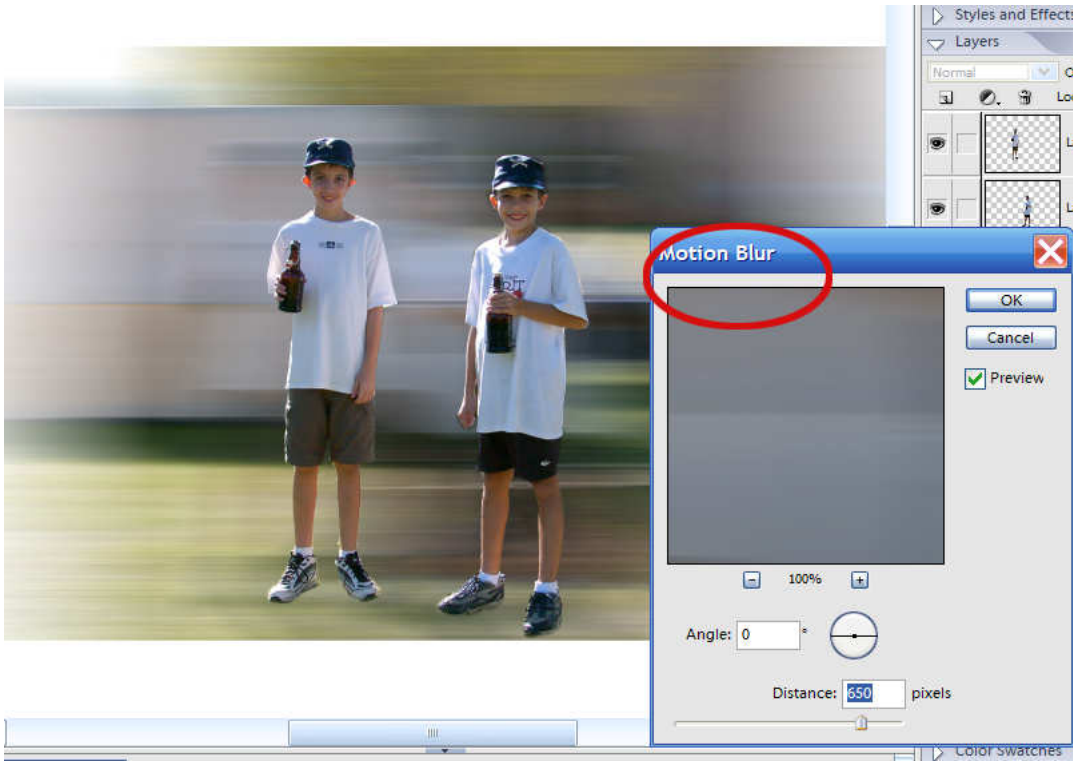
Using a higher radius (19 in my example) makes for another interesting effect that would be unique in a layout. It is not a realistic blur as can be obtained in a camera, but it would still be acceptable in an artistic layout.
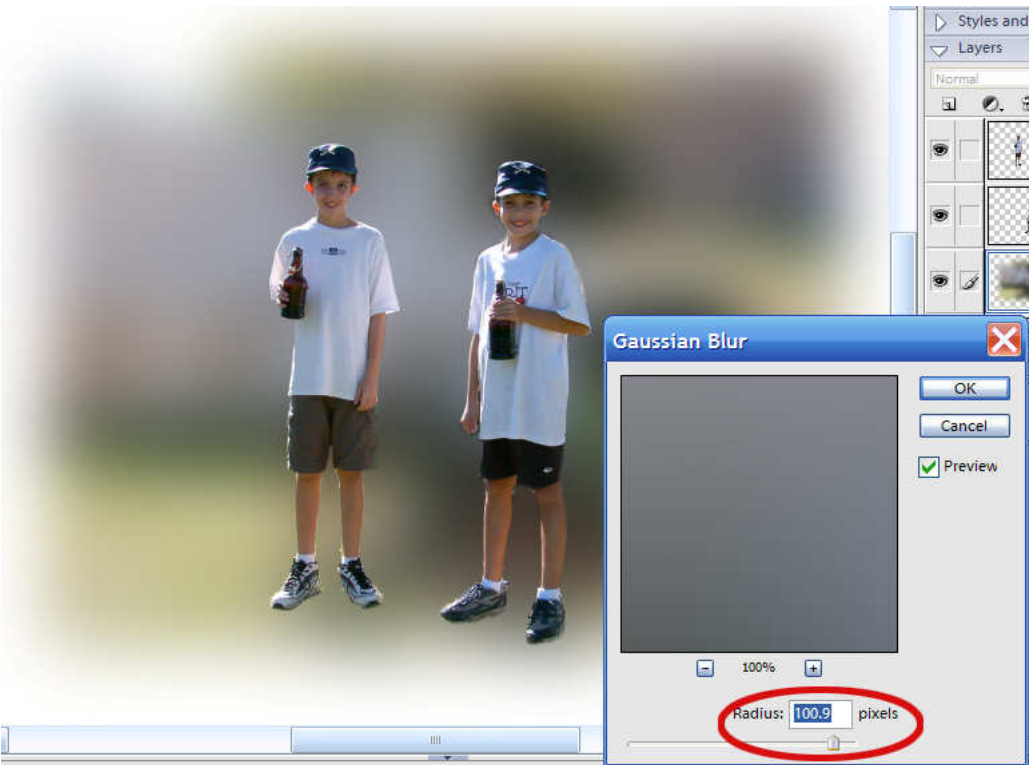

Using even a higher radius creates a background that is unrecognizable, but would be an incredibly artistic contribution to a layout.

Expand your horizons and get out of the box! Explore other options for blurring the background.

Under the Filter drop down menu can be found the Motion Blur. This blur would be perfect for action shots. For example, apply it to photos of children running in a sports game.
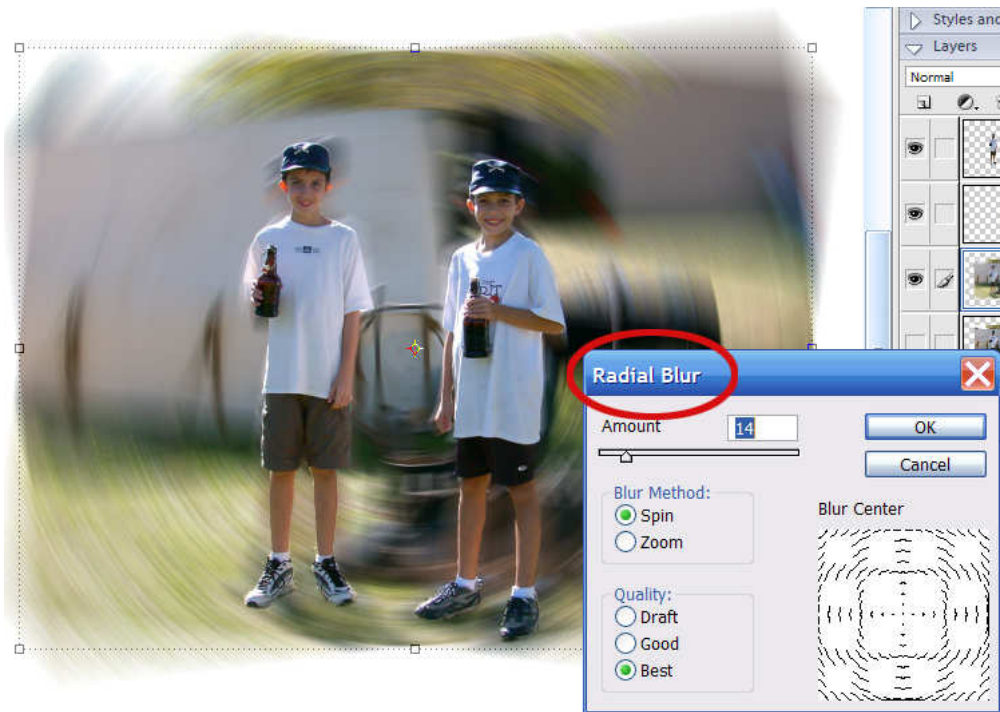

Use the Radial Blur to create a psychedelic background with the Spin Option.

How could this be used creatively? Put your thinking cap on! How about a child coming out of a slide?

You will note three options for quality. This filter is a strain on PSE and, therefore, a test just to see what it does can be obtained quickly through the "Draft" setting. If acceptable, hit undo and change the setting to "Best" to official apply the filter.
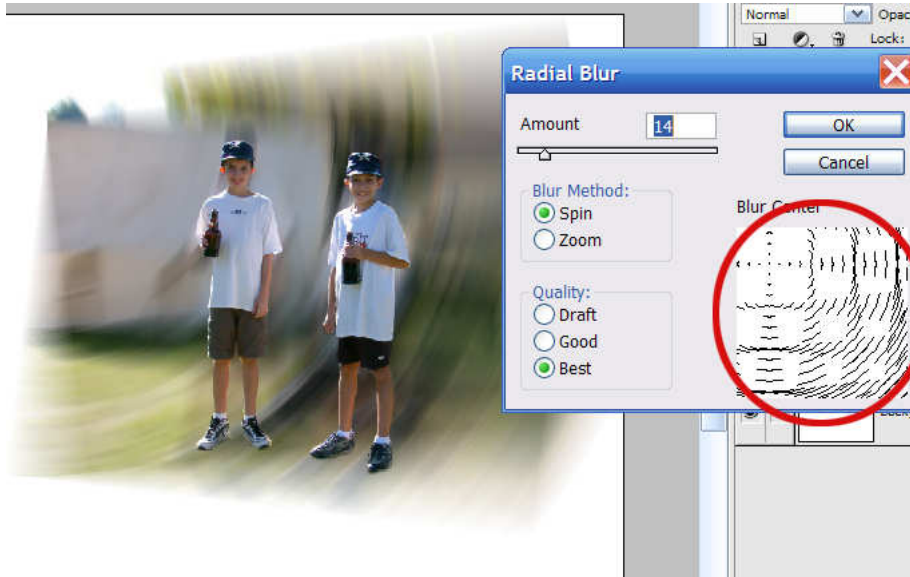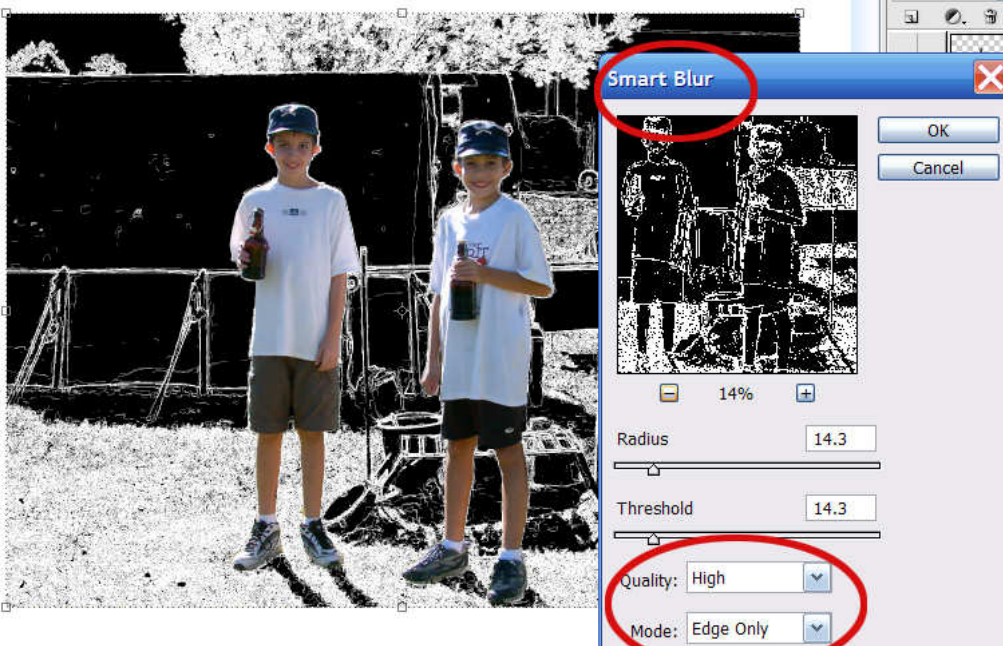
Click right on the graphic in the popup box and move the center of gravity on the blur to any location to create many more possibilities of creative layouts.
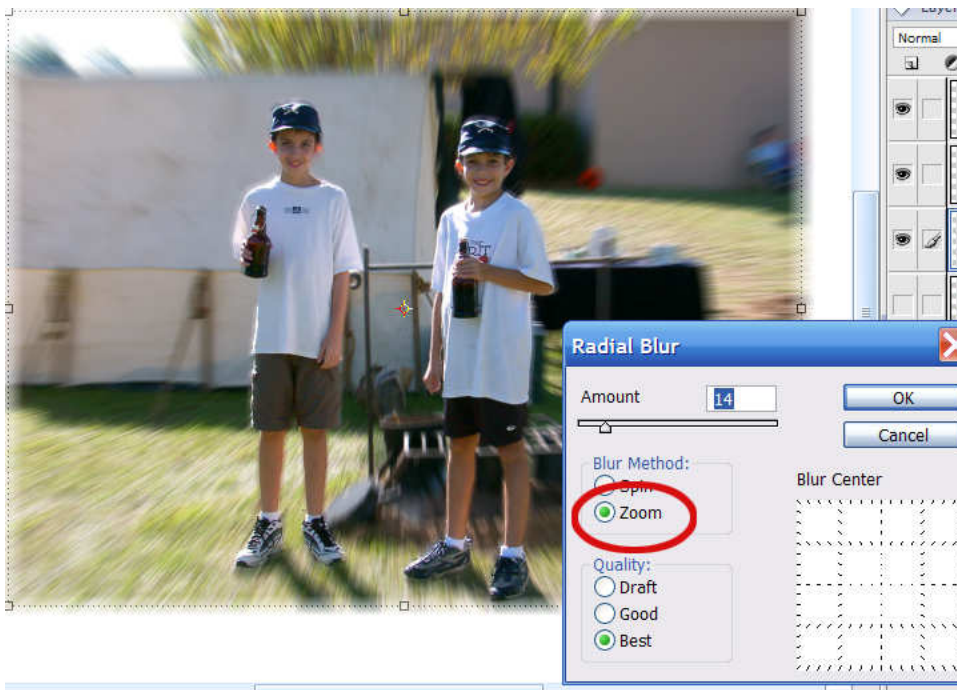
Change the option to Zoom for another variation of a blur in motion.

Anyone feeling dizzy yet?

Another tool under the Filter drop down menu is the Smart Blur. The Smart Blur has three modes: Normal, Edge Only, and Overlay Edge.

The Normal Mode is not useful for the purposes of this tutorial, but it is an often overlooked tool with great purposes.

Smart blur reduces noise, such as blotchy places or spots. In essence, it will undo what a noise filter will do. It finds the edges of subjects and protects them while slightly blurring everything else to smooth the blotches. The change after running this tool is not dramatic enough to be utilized in this tutorial; however, it is useful on those grainy photos or low resolution photos straight from the camera.

However, the Edge Only mode creates a very unique background as it applies a white line to all defined edges and fills in the remaining area with black. This tool creates a sketch look to the background.

The third mode, the Overlay Edge, also creates a very unique background for artistic layouts. This mode also applies a white line to all defined edges; however, rather than filling in the remaining area with black, it instead blurs, yet sharpens the remaining area in a unique way.

I personally like the look of this one.

Do not stop there! Keep your creative juices flowing! Test other filters on the background! I particularly liked the way the crosshatch looked on my photo, as well as the Smudge Stick.
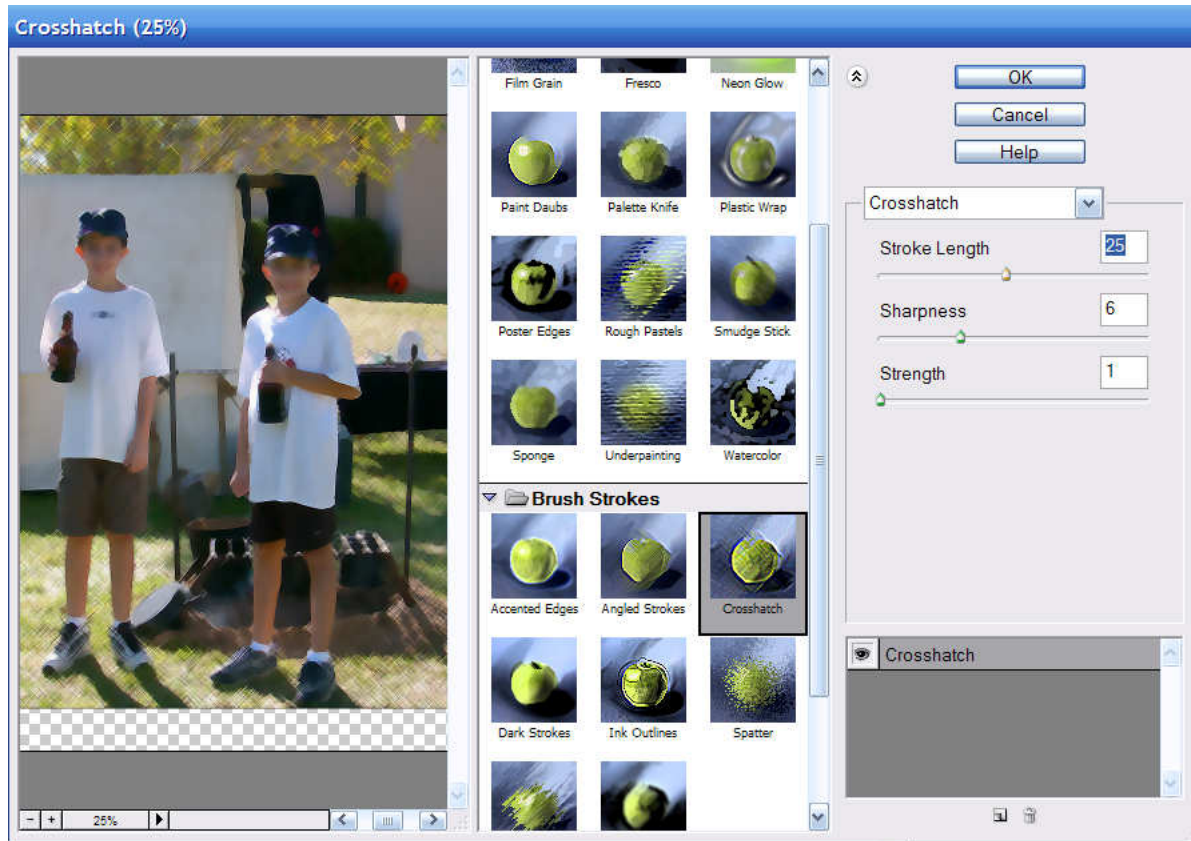
This is what my photo looks like with the crosshatch filter.

More possibilities abound if you just let your imagination run! Reduce the opacity to the background or play with blending modes! Most of all just have fun!