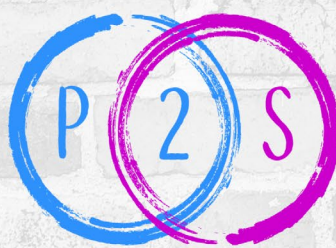


You've Got This!

FOR PARENTS & CARERS

Sue Atkins

The Parenting Expert



primary2secondary

Aiding
Mental
Health



A Little Bit About Us...

Sue Atkins and Jo FitzGerald are both ex Deputy-head teachers. Jo is an author, and an instructor for Mental Health First Aid England and her company '**Aiding Mental Health**' delivers courses on all aspects of youth and adult mental health.



Sue is the parenting expert for **Disney Junior UK, BBC Radio, and ITV's 'This Morning'**. Her Facebook group '**Don't Stew – Ask Sue Atkins**' helps and advises parents with all things parenting. Check her out on Instagram at '**sueatkins18**'.

We hope you and your child find this helpful, and if you have any more questions for us, we're more than happy to help. Just email us at **info@primary2secondary.co.uk** Do take a look at our Facebook page (primary2secondary), and at our website **www.primary2secondary.co.uk** for more help and information.



AS SEEN AND HEARD ON



BBC RADIO



Unexpected Events – Unexpected Parenting

Well – no one wrote a book for parents about this situation, did they? Just you wait though – a few months from now, there will be books galore on 'Pandemic Parenting.'

We've put together a few quick wins for you – just as a little reminder on how best to handle this situation amid all the uncertainty, unfamiliar and unknowns.

First, here are some insights from an ex-pat parent/teacher in China – someone who underwent seven weeks of absolute lockdown – and came out of the other side smiling and very positive.

1. Let go!

Accept that you have no control over the situation. Let go of any thoughts of trying to plan too much for the next month or two. Things change so fast. Don't be angry and annoyed at the system. If you do this, anxiety reduces, and you make the best of the situation – whatever that might be for you. Accept that this is what it is, and things will get easier.

2. Limit news intake

Try not to listen to/read/watch too much media. It WILL drive you crazy. There is such a thing as too much!

3. Community is so important

The sense of community I have felt during this time is incredible. I could choose who I wanted to spend my energy on – who I wanted to call, message, and connect with and found the quality of my relationships has improved.

4. Live in the moment

Appreciate this enforced downtime. When do you ever have time like this? I will miss it when we go back to the fast-paced speed of the 'real world'.

5. Time goes so quickly

Time goes so fast. I still haven't picked up the ukelele I planned to learn, and there are box set TV shows I haven't watched yet.

6. I've built great relationships with my students

As a teacher, the relationships I have built with my students have only continued to grow. I have loved seeing how independent they are: filming themselves to respond to tasks while also learning essential life skills such as balance, risk-taking, and problem-solving. That even we as adults are still learning. (Relate this to your own children. It's a great time to strengthen the bonds between you, share really important moments, and watch them learn and develop – look at those positives and cherish this time together).

7. It's the little things in life

You learn to appreciate the little things; sunshine through the window, flowers blossoming, and being able to enjoy a coffee in a cafe.

To those just beginning this journey, You will get through it. Listen to what you are told, follow the rules, and look out for each other. There is light at the end of the tunnel. Stay safe; stay healthy.

There's some really great advice there – this is not going to be a walk in the park (whoops – unfortunate phrase!!). But, we can make it as positive as possible for ourselves and our family – so that what we do during this time can have real benefits to our family relationships and our own, and our children's wellbeing in the coming years.



Quick Win No.1



Communicating Together

Good communication is important at any time, but during times of change and times where there is worry and possible anxiety, it's vital that there is healthy, reassuring, and supportive communication between family members.

Children hear and see so very much. Even even if we are careful to shield them from potentially worrying information, they have vivid imaginations, and this can lead to them having negative feelings and emotions, which might get overwhelming. It's important that they feel confident and able to share these thoughts and feelings and to ask any questions that they may have. If we talk about our worries, they often become smaller and manageable – or disappear entirely. When we speak and are listened to, when our questions are answered, we feel heard, reassured, and supported.

Obviously, in these strange and uncertain times, you can decide what your child needs to know. It will depend on their age and understanding, their sensitivity, their personality... because you know them best. We have included a page with simple details about the virus that might be helpful.

Another reason that good communication is important is that most of us will be spending a LOT of time together, much more than we're used to. There are going to be new frustrations for everyone, young and old – and more so as time goes on.

As adults, we also need to be aware of our own stressors, at a time where we may be anxious about money, food, rent, jobs, work commitments, family, home-schooling, responsibilities... and the emotions these bring. That's without the worry of the virus itself – we have an awful lot on our plate at the moment.

We're going to look at the foundation of how we can share our worries, thoughts, and feelings together – as a family. First, we're going to explore the five steps of effective communication.

You probably already have a great way of talking together – that's wonderful. But communication isn't just about talking, is it? Did you know that words only account for 7% of the overall message we communicate? That means that 38% of WHAT we communicate is through our tone of voice, and 55% is through our body language.

Keeping that in mind, here are five positive family communication rules you can follow in your home. These can really help your family share your worries, thoughts, and feelings openly, confidently, and in a way that you all feel listened to and valued.

1. Think before you speak.

Do take the time to **think about what you want to say, before you say it**. Make sure your words, tone, and body language reflect what you mean. Then, when you do speak, listen to yourself. The only way for us to know how our words and tone truly sound to others is to pay attention to ourselves. Listen to how slowly or quickly you speak, how soft or loud you are, how loving or angry you may sound. This is what your family members hear, and it makes a big impact on how what you say is received. In this particularly difficult time, it's especially important not to come across as hugely anxious, upset, angry... It's OK to feel those things – but be mindful not to cause more worry and anxiety. Remember that this could have long term repercussions.

2. Respect each other's viewpoints.

This is especially important for older children. Remember – there are a lot of 'rights', depending on who you are talking to. So, avoid getting caught up in 'right versus wrong', and instead learn to respect each other's differences, thoughts, and opinions. It often helps to put yourself in the other person's position, instead of being judgmental or biased by your own beliefs. A big part of respect is understanding that it's essential to be honest when talking together. It might feel like the right thing to do is bend or hide the truth to avoid hurting each other – but being dishonest breaks trust. So be gentle with the truth – it will help build that trust, so that your child feels more open, confident, and used to sharing even the most difficult things.

It's also really important not to dismiss fears. If your child is afraid because a friend told him he might die, or if your child is worried that someone in your family might die – that's a real fear, and you should take it seriously. If you simply tell your child, "You'll be fine," or "That's ridiculous", they might not feel heard, and that means trust is lost. Carefully listen to them and look at their body language and expression, so that you can track what your child is feeling. You can say something in a calm voice like, "That sounds really scary. I can see it in your face." You can then reassure them by going over how you are keeping safe, and relaying facts appropriate to their age. e.g., "Most people will only get a little bit poorly, like having a cold", or "Scientists and really smart people all around the world are telling us how to keep safe and healthy. We are doing all we can to keep everyone safe." And ask them, "Is there anything else we could do to help you feel better about this?" Some of the activities we have provided will help you with this.

3. Let others speak!

You know how frustrating it can be when you are trying to speak, and someone cuts you off in the middle of your sentence? Allowing others to speak until they finish, **without interrupting**, is an excellent rule for everyone to follow. Along with this is trying to be a good listener. When someone is speaking to you, give them your attention. Avoid thinking about what you are going to say next and focus on what they are saying NOW and what your family member might be feeling. When someone feels listened to, they feel valued and seen. This is particularly important where you are talking about your child's future – they need to feel involved and that their thoughts and feelings have real value in this process.

4. Don't Assume!

Always try to avoid making any assumptions about someone else's thoughts, feelings, or anticipated behaviour, because none of us are mind readers! If you feel unsure about something and want to check in with someone – to clarify the situation, that's OK. Simply say, "So what I'm hearing you say is..." and repeat back what you heard. If you heard correctly, that's great! And if not, a misunderstanding can be avoided. If you acknowledge and validate all feelings, it will make everyone feel free to share them again in the future. Please don't make accusations or criticise each other. That can turn a conversation into a very 'unsafe' space, and it breaks down trust and a willingness to share.

5. Choose your time and place.

It's a great idea to establish a 'routine' – maybe a mealtime or a time of day when you all have some free time together. Making a routine can help foster the idea of a time where it's a usual thing to share and communicate, and it becomes kind of a 'habit' to do so. Other things to bear in mind are that it's sometimes easier for children to talk to you when they have your undivided attention – maybe without other siblings around. Sometimes it's also much more comfortable to chat when you're side-by-side, as opposed to opposite one another. It can be a bit more relaxed – sitting on the sofa can be a great opportunity for this. Even better is going for a walk, as exercise and getting out in nature can loosen up those thoughts and tongues! Just remember the current guidance about this – for exercise only! No picnics!

You can use these skills, as a family, to work through the worksheets we've given your child – especially where they are thinking about worries and thoughts around all the changes that are happening. Maybe you could make a FAMILY COMMUNICATION poster together – with five things for everyone to remember when you're talking/listening together? It often helps to have reminders and guidelines – especially as children grow into teenagers (believe us – we have six children between us!).

Another really important reason for us sharing these tips is so that you can carry on using these skills throughout the following months and years, when we're all back to whatever is the new 'normal' – and into the future.



Quick Win No.2

Routine and Home-schooling

During times of change, uncertainty, and the unfamiliar, having a routine can be reassuring and brings some necessary control back into our lives, and the lives of our children. Now – this is really important – we're NOT talking a detailed schedule here. Keep it simple – with loose guidelines. That way, you can adapt and be flexible to people's mood and energy levels. It also means that there's not too much pressure on any of you to achieve the difficult or the impossible. This is an extreme situation, and our mental health and wellbeing are so very important – so just go with the flow. Having a routine is helpful to your mental health because it does give you some kind of structure for your days – and that is both useful and reassuring.

My cousin seems to have it right and has found something that works for her family – she has two boys aged 8 and 12. Kassie has a simple planner, and she and her two boys set their daily routine first thing each day. It includes time for schoolwork, outside time, free time, family time, and mealtimes... Including the boys in the scheduling is such a great idea. It gives them ownership of their day, a feeling that they have some control and makes them a lot happier to follow the routine. There are a few things that shape the day and don't really change; meal times are the same – and exercise is always the Joe Wicks workout at the same time each morning. Before bed, everyone in the family has a session of independent reading – sitting in the same room, and each of them silently reading their own book. They are all loving this – and want to continue it after their isolation. Time will tell!

Here are a few tips for your routine and home-schooling:

- You can adapt a written routine for younger children, perhaps adding pictures or emoji-like icons. Put stickers next to them or cross them out as they're completed for the day
- Put 'getting dressed' and 'keeping clean' into the routine. If we get dressed or at least put on clean pyjamas, it does lift our mood and energy levels. Hygiene is also really important – especially as we're all living so close to each other at the moment!
- Put some household chores on the routine too. It gives children responsibility and gets you all working together
- If anyone seems stressed, move up TV time or another relaxing/physical activity
- Take advantage of not having a detailed timetable. If your child thinks of a new project they'd like to do, wants to make something, or explore or research an interest, then let them. A bit of spontaneity is great – and keeps motivation, concentration, and energy levels up
- Have frequent movement breaks during the day – this will help concentration and mood
- Have a family 'check-in' each evening where you just have a casual chat together and see how everyone is feeling, what are they finding difficult? What seems to be working and is enjoyable? If anyone is having a slump, feeling anxious or down, talk it through

and think of what might help, e.g., "I'm missing my friend" – so let's make sure we video call them tomorrow

- Do use technology to stay socially connected – it can be a crucial part of both children's and parent's mental health. Keep in touch regularly with friends and family, and make it an important part of your day
- Read freely. This can be anything your child is interested in – sports magazines, comic books, graphic novels... There is a lot of free stuff available on the internet, so make it an activity for your child to find and make their own reading list – then work through it. Even television breaks can help with literacy! You can watch television with the closed captioning on – this is great for younger and emerging readers because seeing the words with the visuals helps teach sight words. Win-Win!
- Maths doesn't have to be all worksheets and sums! Your home is filled with opportunities to practice maths skills, if you know where to look. Planning a home delivery? (You should be so lucky!!!) Give them a budget and let them help figure out what you can buy. Or turn a set of stairs into times-tables practice by letting them climb while calling out multiples for each step. For instance, the first time is by twos, then by threes, then by fours
- Play! Play is so very important for the wellbeing of all of us – and so many children don't usually get much time to play. This is especially true as they get older, and their days are filled with school and extra-curricular activities. Today's circumstances are a wonderful opportunity for play to be prioritised
- Encourage journaling. These are extraordinary times, so encourage children to document what's going on in their lives. A daily journal helps children keep track of not just day-to-day events, but their thoughts and feelings about it as well. (*We have provided your child with a worksheet for this*)
- Childhood unplugged. Creativity is the most wonderful thing – children can learn so many things from any creative activity. Hit pause before you download a bunch of academic apps, or more worksheets. How about doing a puppet show, writing a song, a poem, or making and designing a board game. The activities that excite children tend to be the ones they learn from most easily. If it's engaging, they're going to learn from it. You don't have to be there with them all the time – give them the idea, a few basic instructions – and they'll be engrossed
- If you have an only child, or a child that would benefit from doing an activity with someone else, get them hooked up on video with a friend or a cousin or grandma. It will also free you up to do other things
- Most of all, try to see this weird time together as an opportunity for you all – a time of positivity, a time to make lovely memories, a time to grow together. Minimise pressure and stress. Enjoy.
- Breathe! Prioritise family happiness and wellbeing. This at-home break *will* end, and life will eventually return to normal.

Quick Win No.3

Don't Forget YOU

To keep kids healthy and happy, parents need to stay healthy and happy too – not always easy in this complex and uncertain situation. Here are our 10 Top Tips to maintain your own wellbeing and robust mental health.

1. Get Into Your Own Routine

In times of uncertainty and change, it can help our general wellbeing if we have some kind of routine. It helps to give us back a little bit of control in our life and can be reassuring, as well as keeping us on track with achieving daily goals. These goals shouldn't be huge – we don't want to put extra pressure on ourselves, but we're much more likely to achieve them if they are written down. Spending all day in your pyjama's and forgetting to brush your teeth might seem fun to start with, but won't do much good for your mental health. Create a plan for the day, try and get up and go to bed at a reasonable time to ensure you get enough sleep (no Netflix 'til 4 am!). Getting the correct amount of sleep is vital to your wellbeing, especially when you have children and other commitments.

2. Have A Healthy Diet

When you're at home all day (and REALLY close to the kitchen), it can be tempting to be eating unbalanced meals and to be snacking all day as a way to entertain and soothe yourself. If you're feeling low or stressed, try not to add to a slump by drinking lots of alcohol once the kids are in bed – or eating lots of junk. Also, avoid having too much caffeine, if it affects you, as this can contribute to feeling anxious and can affect sleep. Another hugely important aspect is to keep hydrated – drink water if possible, keep it near you, and drink at LEAST three big glasses a day. Being properly hydrated really helps your wellbeing, stops you feeling so tired, and also aids concentration and physical health. Do your best to eat well. Fruit and vegetables are very important to our physical health – and that impacts our mental health.

3. Consume News Wisely

The blanket 24/7 coverage of coronavirus can easily impact on your mental health, particularly on social media. Make sure you opt-out and try not to listen to the constant stream of news reports, which can cause anyone to feel anxious. Listen only to qualified health professionals and visit the WHO or Government websites for reliable information. Also, do try to avoid reading the news or social media just before going to sleep.

4. Engage With Nature

Try to get exposure to the outside world as much as possible within the limits of your self-isolation. Ideally, get out into the garden or on a balcony if you have one. If you can't physically get outside, spend a portion of your day looking outside, open your windows to get some fresh air, or tend to your house plants. Now is also a great time to plant some seeds, flowers, or vegetables with your children. *(Everything you need is still available online, lots of local suppliers still need your support and are delivering).*

5. Keep Active

Try to create a routine that includes some physical exercise – this is so very important. There is a huge link between physical health and mental health because the brain is connected to the body. So how well we're managing our physical health will directly affect our mental health. Keeping fit with regular exercise also improves our immune system – so it's REALLY important right now. Even if we can't get out to exercise, there's lots of ways to get a good workout indoors. Use the internet to find videos of something appropriate to your ability and remember to warm up those muscles first and exercise safely – a trip to A&E is not recommended at the moment!

6. Be Kind To Yourself

Don't put too much pressure on yourself. If your children don't want to do schoolwork or their behaviour escalates on certain days – don't take it personally. It's quite normal - it's the situation that isn't normal. Give yourself a bit of extra love and speak to yourself with kindness and appreciation.

7. Stay Connected

Just because you're self-isolating or social distancing doesn't mean you have to cut yourself off altogether. In fact, it's more important now to keep in touch with people regularly and stay connected. Make sure you stay in touch with friends and family via email, social media, video conference, messenger, telephone... Connection to others really contributes to our wellbeing and happiness. It's also really important if you're struggling with tough emotions. You can reach out to someone you trust to share how you're feeling – and that could be a game-changer. Apps like 'Houseparty' and Zoom are great. You can have friends and family sharing screens on laptops/tablets/mobile phones – and chat and play games together. It can be something to look forward to and lifts everyone's mood, as well as being reassuring because we know we're not alone in this.

8. Check In On Yourself

Ask yourself, how am I feeling today? There are going to be days when we feel good, and other times that are much more tricky where we might struggle. Check in on yourself a couple of times a day. If you're feeling low or anxious, especially if this lasts a few days or more – it might be time to get some support or practice some self-care. To help get you out of a low mood, do something that makes you happy, something creative would be great, or listen to music, start writing THAT book, learn something new... Meditation and yoga are also really effective in combatting low mood or anxiety – as is exercise. Laughter is also really beneficial, watch some funny cat videos, or catch your favourite comedian online – whatever tickles your funnybone and gets those endorphins flooding around.

9. Let It Go!

Try not to get hung up on all the change, the uncertainty, the unknown, the difficulties – it can become overwhelming, and that's when our mental health takes a nosedive. Ask yourself, "What can I change?" and "What is outside of my control?" There is no use getting hung up on things that we can't do anything about – tell yourself that this is temporary. It will pass. If there are worries and anxieties about things that you CAN do something about – that should be your focus. Make a plan about the steps you can take towards reaching a

resolution, a goal, then put that plan in action – or wait until you can. If we have a plan and know what to do, it can ease any anxiety we feel.

10. Focus On The Positive

There are so many things that can cause us to worry and bring us down at the moment, but we can CHOOSE to focus on the good things we have in our lives. We all have things for which we can be grateful, whatever problems we have too. Every day, I write down two things that I am grateful for in a notebook. It can be anything – people, pets, experiences... the list will grow and grow. Doing this means we are giving our focus to what is good, which gets all those great chemicals pulsing around our brain. If you're feeling a bit low, just take a look at that 'grateful' list to remind you of all the positives you have in your life.

Positive thinking doesn't mean that you keep your head in the sand and ignore life's less pleasant situations. It just means that you approach unpleasantness more positively and productively. You think the best is going to happen, not the worst – it makes us more optimistic, is great for managing stress, and better able to cope.

We hope that the activities and tips have been useful
for you and your child.

It's so important, in this time of great change, that we
prioritise everyone's wellbeing.

For now and for the future.

If you have enjoyed using these resources, please
recommend them to friends and family.

Stay safe & strong.

Love from,

Sue & Jo

www.primary2secondary.co.uk