



ACS  
INTERNATIONAL  
SCHOOLS

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# GENERATION TONGUE-TIED

WHY TEENS ARE STRUGGLING TO SPEAK UP

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## FOREWORD

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Today's students communicate in ways their parents could never have imagined when they were growing up. Yet when asked to make a phone call, deliver a presentation, or engage in small talk at a family gathering, many young people freeze.

Grown-ups are concerned, and rightly so. This is not misplaced parental anxiety or generational hand-wringing. The research in this report reveals a communication crisis happening at precisely the wrong moment in history. Just as artificial intelligence makes human communication skills more valuable than ever, we are raising a generation that appears to avoid them.

In many schools, teachers know this problem all too well. Students who can craft compelling Instagram stories struggle to maintain eye contact. Teenagers who debate passionately in online forums go silent in classroom discussions. Young adults who coordinate online gaming strategies across continents cannot order coffee directly from a barista without anxiety.

Nearly four in five parents report their teenagers get embarrassed and tongue-tied in face-to-face conversations. The issue is not that today's teens communicate differently; it is that they are losing confidence in the fundamental human interactions that no technology can replace.

This report challenges us all to recognise that communication

is a core capability that must be deliberately taught, practised and assessed. At ACS, we don't measure success through grades alone. We understand that evaluating a young person's readiness requires looking beyond examination results in core subjects to the wider constellation of durable skills they'll need to act as confident individuals and capable communicators as they move into the world.

University admissions teams consistently tell us that ACS students stand out not just for their academic preparation but for their confidence, their ability to articulate complex ideas and their comfort engaging with diverse viewpoints online and in face-to-face conversation.

The future belongs not to those who can code or calculate in isolation, but to those who can connect, convince and collaborate in person.

I strongly believe that this generation has not lost the ability to communicate. They are, however, in danger of losing the social-emotional confidence that effective communication requires across a wide range of interpersonal contexts. Schools that understand this distinction, and act on it, will equip their students to thrive in a world where human connection will continue to lead with a human advantage.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today's teenagers are caught in a communication puzzle – they are the most connected generation in history, yet many now struggle with the basic human interactions that define professional and personal success. Our research reveals that while teens are digitally fluent, they are becoming verbally hesitant, with significant implications for their education, employment and wellbeing.

The report shows that nine in ten parents say their teenager actively avoids certain social situations. Three in five avoid small talk, followed by maintaining eye contact (two in five) and answering unknown phone calls (more than a third). This suggests a systematic withdrawal from the everyday interactions that build communication competence. Parents estimate their teenagers experience tongue-tied moments an average of 16 times per month and ask for help handling social interactions multiple times per week. Teens are not naturally outgrowing their communication anxiety - this dependency persists from age 13 through to 19.

But this generation has not lost the ability to communicate. They communicate constantly, just not in traditional ways. When motivated, four in five teenagers say they will speak up on topics that they care about. The challenge, it appears, is transferring their digital confidence to face-to-face contexts.

Parents overwhelmingly believe schools must take greater responsibility. Eight in ten think schools should do more to develop speaking and listening skills, with a third calling it 'essential'. This aligns with policy momentum, including the Oracy Education Commission's call for communication to be embedded across curricula.

The rise of artificial intelligence adds even more urgency to this challenge. Rather than making human communication obsolete, AI makes it more valuable. Over seven in ten parents recognise that as AI advances, strong communication skills will become more important for career success, not less. A similar number of teenagers agree with this viewpoint too.

## Importance of communication skills in an AI era – parents' perspective

Much more important

37%

Somewhat more important

35%

The same

19%

Less important

9%

Schools can either continue treating communication as a personality trait that some students naturally possess, or they can recognise it as a core academic skill that must be deliberately developed. The evidence suggests that schools embedding structured oracy programmes see measurable improvements in student confidence, academic performance, and future readiness.

Academic excellence and communication skills are inseparable in 2026. Students need subject knowledge they can articulate, technical skills they can apply collaboratively, and both digital literacy and face-to-face confidence.

### About the research

This research was conducted online by Perspectus Global in October 2025 on behalf of ACS International Schools. The study surveyed 3,208 people in the UK across two groups:

**2,003**

parents with teenage children, aged 13-19

**1,205**

teenagers, aged 13-19

\*Due to rounding, percentages may not always total 100%.

# MAIN FINDINGS

## The scale of the communication confidence gap

The findings show that many of today’s teenagers face a significant communication confidence crisis. Nearly three in five teens definitively agree that they are more confident communicating via text, voice notes and emojis than in real life, with another third somewhat agreeing. This is not a marginal preference but an overwhelming consensus.

### Teen communication preference – digital vs face-to-face

More confident communicating digitally



Equally or more confident face-to-face



Parents observe this digital-first approach on a daily basis. Almost half (48%) say their children are definitely more confident online than in real life, with another 37% noting at least some difference.

Communication breakdowns happen frequently, suggesting that communication anxiety is not a phase teenagers naturally outgrow but a persistent challenge requiring intervention. When uncomfortable in face-to-face conversations, teenagers go quiet, fidget nervously, stumble over their words, or stare at the floor.

### Do your teens experience social anxiety

Yes, frequently



Yes, sometimes



This behaviour goes beyond shyness or introversion - over a third of parents (37%) believe modern teenagers are definitely less confident communicators than previous generations, with another 32% seeing possible decline. Parents worry that mobile messaging apps have replaced proper conversations, with 56% definitely concerned and another 40% somewhat worried.



### How teens respond to communication discomfort – parents’ perspective

Go quiet	56%
Fidget	46%
Stumble over words	34%
Stare at the floor	32%

Nearly three-quarters of parents (73%) attribute this confidence gap to teenagers’ online lives. They point to reduced face-to-face interaction (61%) and social media (55%) changing how people engage with one another.

“The future belongs to those who can work synergistically with technology while excelling at fundamentally human capabilities.”

# SYSTEMATIC AVOIDANCE OF EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS

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One of the most concerning findings is the extent to which teenagers actively avoid routine social interactions. Nine in ten parents (91%) report their teenager dodges certain social situations.

The avoidance list reads like a catalogue of essential life skills. Small talk tops the list at 63%, yet this seemingly trivial interaction forms the foundation of networking, relationship building and professional success. Four in ten teenagers avoid eye contact when speaking, undermining their ability to build trust, and demonstrate engagement.

## Six situations that teenagers actively avoid – Parents’ perspective

Small talk

63%

Looking someone in the eye when talking

40%

Answering phone if number not recognised

35%

Answering the doorbell if not sure who it is

33%

Asking for help in a shop

34%

Giving a handshake

26%

Practical tasks become sources of anxiety with over a third of teenagers avoiding answering unknown phone calls (35%) or asking for help in shops (34%). Nearly one in three struggle to order food from waiters, while almost a quarter won't speak up if their order is subsequently incorrect.

Teenagers themselves confirm these behaviours. A third admit to avoiding lots of social situations (33%), with another 54% avoiding at least some. Their top challenges mirror parental observations: small talk (59%), eye contact (36%), and talking in front of groups (29%).

But by avoiding interactions, teenagers miss opportunities to practise and build confidence. And the workplace implications are profound. Employers consistently cite communication as their top requirement, yet young people systematically avoid the very interactions that develop these skills. Phone calls, face-to-face meetings, casual conversations and presentations are fundamental workplace requirements.

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“ Schools must move beyond merely transmitting knowledge towards preparing students to be genuinely ready for the world.”

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# CAPABILITY VERSUS CONFIDENCE

Despite their communication anxieties, teenagers demonstrate remarkable capability when motivated. When topics matter to them teenagers can find their voice. A quarter (25%) of parents describe their children as very willing to express different views and comfortable challenging others when they disagree. Over half (55%) say their teenagers will speak up on subjects they care about. Parents say that only 20% of teenagers stay quiet even when holding strong opposing views.

Teenagers themselves report similar patterns. When facing different viewpoints a quarter say they are very comfortable engaging, enjoying the exchange of ideas. More than half will disagree when necessary. Only one in five find such interactions so uncomfortable or stressful that they'd prefer to stay quiet.

### Teenage willingness to express disagreement when it matters to them

Very willing	26%
Somewhat willing	54%
Not very willing	17%
Not willing at all	3%

This selective confidence suggests teenagers have not lost the ability to communicate effectively - the challenge is context rather than capability. Digital spaces offer scaffolds that disappear in face-to-face interaction: time to craft responses, edit before sending and delete mistakes before anyone sees them.

Only a third of parents (32%) rate their teenagers as excellent in both speaking and listening. Another third say their children listen well but struggle to speak up, while 29% report the opposite problem, good at talking but poor at listening. Just 7% struggle with both, suggesting most teenagers possess at least some strong communication foundations.

### Teenagers' perception of social anxiety

Experience social anxiety frequently

25%

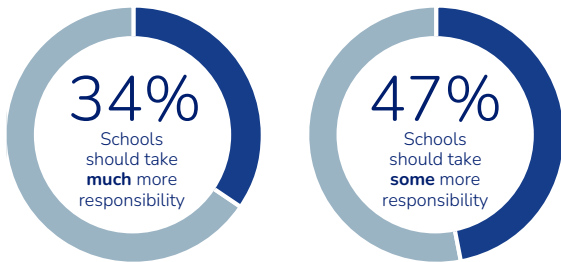
Experience social anxiety at least sometimes

60%



# PARENTS DEMAND SCHOOL ACTION

Parents are clear that they believe schools ought to take greater responsibility for developing communication skills. Eight in ten think that schools should take more responsibility for developing their children’s speaking, listening and communication skills. Over a third call this ‘essential’, while almost half say it is ‘important’. Only 14% think current provision is adequate.



This parental demand now aligns with policy momentum. The Oracy Education Commission’s 2024 report called for speaking and listening to be embedded across all subjects, not confined to English lessons. From September 2028, English state schools will be required to teach oracy systematically across subjects, positioning it alongside reading and writing as a core literacy. For families in mainstream education, this will represent a fundamental curriculum shift.

## Teenagers’ preferred interventions

Intervention / support area	Percentage of teenagers (%)
Speaking practice in supportive, small groups	41%
Learning active listening skills	37%
Exposure to diverse viewpoints	36%
Regular presentation opportunities	30%

## Parents’ views on helpful interventions for teenagers

Intervention / support area	Percentage of parents (%)
Exposure to diverse viewpoints	43%
Practice in supportive environments	40%
Learning active listening skills	37%
Regular public speaking practice	35%
Leadership opportunities	23%
Safe spaces for failure and recovery	23%
Structured debate experience	20%
Exposure to different countries and languages	11%

But currently there is a mismatch between parental expectations and school provision. Schools that do prioritise oracy report significant benefits. Students show improved academic performance, enhanced confidence and better employment readiness.



# WHY AI MAKES HUMAN COMMUNICATION MORE VALUABLE, NOT LESS

As artificial intelligence transforms the workplace, a counterintuitive truth emerges. Human communication skills are becoming more valuable, not less. Parents and teenagers alike recognise this shift, understanding that AI amplifies rather than replaces the need for human connection.



Over 70% of parents believe strong communication skills will become more important as AI advances. More than a third call these skills ‘crucial’, while another third see them as ‘key differentiators’ for career success. Less than one in ten believe technology will handle communication in a way that will ever make human skills redundant.

## Teens recognise that AI makes communication skills more important

Much more important	30%
Somewhat more important	38%
About the same importance	22%
Less important	10%

Teenagers share this perspective with 68% believing communication skills will grow in importance. Nearly a third (30%) see these capabilities as crucial, while 38% consider them key differentiators. Just one in ten expect technology to replace human communication.

This consensus reflects workplace reality. As AI handles more and more routine tasks, data processing and predictable interactions, human workers will need to excel at what AI cannot by building trust, reading emotional nuance, adapting to unexpected situations and creating genuine connections. The skills teenagers currently avoid - small talk, eye-contact, and spontaneous interaction - become precisely what will distinguish them from machines.

Yet the English education system was designed for an age that valued compliance over communication, standardisation over personalisation, and knowledge retention over collaborative problem-solving. Today’s teenagers need preparation for a fundamentally different world where communication capability plays a significant role in determining career trajectory.

The irony here should not be lost. Just as human communication skills become most valuable, we risk raising a generation least equipped to deploy them. This is not inevitable but an educational choice. Schools that recognise and respond to this shift will produce graduates ready for an AI-enhanced world. Those that do not risk leaving students subject-qualified but unprepared for their futures.

# OPINION: COMMUNICATION IS NOT A SOFT SKILL

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*Dr Robert Harrison, Chief Executive, ACS International Schools*

We need to stop calling communication a ‘soft skill’. This relic of mid-twentieth century thinking suggests people-focused skills are somehow less important than more easily-assessed technical capabilities or content area knowledge (so-called ‘hard skills’).

Communication is a competency linked with many others. Without it, the brightest minds cannot share their insights, the most creative souls cannot inspire others and the most skilled professionals cannot collaborate effectively. A software engineer who cannot explain their code, a doctor who cannot comfort patients, or a teacher who cannot engage students, regardless of their technical expertise, is fundamentally limited.



Qualified means possessing subject knowledge and technical skills, the traditional focus of education. Ready means being equipped with adaptable capabilities including communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and cultural intelligence.

Our research consistently shows that readiness matters as much as qualifications for career success and life satisfaction.



This distinction becomes more critical as artificial intelligence transforms the workplace. AI can process information, generate content and even simulate conversation. But it cannot build genuine relationships, inspire teams, or navigate the emotional dynamics of human interaction. The future belongs to those who can work synergistically with technology while excelling at fundamentally human capabilities.

When teenagers avoid basic interactions like ordering a coffee or making phone calls, they are not just missing social opportunities, they are failing to develop fundamental capabilities that will determine their future success.

Some dismiss teenage ‘telephobia’ as a generational preference, suggesting digital natives simply want to prepare considered responses. But the workplace demands real-time contribution, responding with agility, and building human relationships.

The solution is not to bemoan generational change but to bridge the gap between digital fluency and face-to-face confidence. Schools must create structured progressions from comfortable to challenging communication contexts both within and beyond the classroom.

We must also recognise that communication is inevitably influenced by language and culture. What counts as confident communication in one situation may seem aggressive or passive in another. This diversity is an asset to leverage.

Communication is a core academic and personal skill, which must be systematically developed from early years through graduation. Schools must move beyond merely transmitting knowledge towards preparing students to be genuinely ready for the world.

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“ Students who learn to navigate between communication styles develop sophisticated capabilities that their monocultural peers often envy.”

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# THE ACS APPROACH: BUILDING CONFIDENT COMMUNICATORS

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At ACS International Schools our students achieve both academic excellence and the confidence to speak up, not through chance but through deliberate curriculum design that weaves communication throughout every aspect of school life.

## Curriculum structure that demands communication

Whether our students follow the International Baccalaureate or American curriculum pathways, our educational philosophy remains consistent: knowledge without communication capability has limited value. This philosophy, deeply influenced by IB pedagogy, permeates across all of our schools regardless of the specific qualification students pursue.



The IB programmes we offer makes communication development structurally unavoidable. Coursework and assessments emphasise oral communication through debate, seminars, classroom discussions, and formal presentations. At Diploma Programme level, Theory of Knowledge is assessed through oral presentations requiring students to articulate and defend complex

philosophical positions. Extended essays demand defence in viva-style discussions. Science investigations require presentation to peer panels. And group projects in every subject develop collaborative communication under pressure.

The IB's Approaches to Learning framework goes further. It develops social-emotional competence through extensive collaboration, active listening, intercultural dialogue, and oral examinations. These aren't peripheral activities but core components that teachers must build into the courses and assessments.

Unlike systems with high-stakes examinations at 16, continuous assessment throughout the IB values process alongside product, creating dozens of opportunities each year for students to practice and refine their communication capabilities.

## The international school difference

Beyond curriculum structure, something more fundamental shapes communication at ACS: our diverse community of local and internationally mobile families. Parents choose our schools for different reasons – some because their careers take them across borders, others because they value genuine multicultural learning for their children - creating a student body where local and international children learn to communicate across cultures and perspectives together.

This diversity creates daily communication imperatives that don't exist in many other schools. Students cannot retreat into established friendship groups or avoid new people. From their first days in early years, children learn that speaking to unfamiliar people isn't optional but necessary.

The contrast becomes striking when students transfer from more traditional UK settings. One parent recently described to me her daughter's first week at ACS after eight years in another school. The girl was shocked at being asked to explain her opinion in class and deliver a presentation with peer Q&As. She told her mother she had never been asked to speak in class before. Within weeks she was participating confidently. The capability had always been there, just never developed.

The result is what we call intercultural competence. It's the ability to communicate across cultural contexts, to navigate between communication styles and to read social cues that vary by culture. University admissions tutors and employers consistently tell us this differentiates our graduates.

This isn't about teaching special lessons on communication. It's the natural consequence of being part of a community where talking to people from different countries, in different languages, across different cultural norms, is simply how our schools work every day.

## Real-world partnerships

Getting students out into the world, beyond their comfort zones, builds communication capability like nothing else. Our partnership programmes place students in situations where communication has real consequences - presenting to business leaders, collaborating with community organisations, or participating in international exchanges. These experiences teach students to adapt their communication style to audience and purpose. A presentation to peers differs from a pitch to executives, which differs from facilitating a community workshop.

Meanwhile, our commitment to student voice creates continuous communication practice opportunities through student councils, wellbeing committees, and policy development groups where teenagers

research positions, articulate arguments, and negotiate compromises with school leaders. And our student-led organisations, from Model United Nations to drama productions, develop capabilities that classroom learning alone cannot provide. Students build confidence in speaking and understanding people across a wide range of situations through these engagements.

## Questions parents should ask any school

As parents evaluate schools, we encourage them to look beyond the marketing materials and ask these specific questions about communication development.

**1. How is speaking and listening assessed across subjects, not just in English?**

**2. What structured progression exists for communication skills from early years through to senior years?**

**3. How much lesson time involves student talk versus teacher talk?**

**4. What opportunities exist for public speaking, debate and presentation?**

**5. How do you support students with communication anxiety?**

**6. How do you balance digital communication skills with face-to-face development?**

Schools that cannot answer these questions comprehensively are not preparing students for 21st-century success, regardless of their academic results.

## CONCLUSION

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Our research reveals a young generation at a crossroads. Teenagers can continue down a path of increasing digital isolation, avoiding the very interactions that build human connection and career capability. Or they can, with proper support, transfer their undeniable communication abilities from screen to face-to-face contexts.

This is not abstract theory. If our findings are accurate then your teenager is asking you to handle interactions for them many times per week. When they avoid ordering a drink, answering unknown phone calls, or making small talk, they are not just being shy. They are missing dozens of opportunities each month to develop capabilities that will determine their career success and life satisfaction.

Employers rank communication as their top requirement, yet few believe that young recruits are work-ready. Nearly 70% of teenagers recognise that as AI advances, human communication skills become more important, not less. They understand the problem. What they need is structured support to address it.

Every time you speak for your teen instead of coaching them through discomfort you reinforce the message that face-to-face interaction is optional. Every avoided conversation represents a missed learning opportunity. This generation faces real challenges and rising anxiety. But allowing them to opt out of human interaction risks leaving them unprepared for adult life.

The good news is that intervention works. Schools that systematically develop communication see measurable improvements. Students who receive structured support gain confidence and are better prepared for university. Teenagers who practise in safe environments transfer skills to challenging contexts.

No child has lost the ability to communicate. Most demonstrate remarkable fluency and sophistication in digital spaces. The challenge is helping them recognise these capabilities can transfer to face-to-face contexts.

Schools serious about communication development teach, assess, and value it alongside traditional academics. They provide structured progression from comfortable to challenging contexts. They treat speaking as a core skill requiring deliberate development.

The future belongs to those who can communicate across all contexts, digital and physical, synchronous and asynchronous, familiar and foreign. Our teenagers have mastered half this equation. Our job is to help them complete it.





## ACS International Schools

Founded in 1967 to serve the needs of global and local families, ACS International Schools educate around 2000 students, aged 2 to 18, day and boarding, from more than 100 countries. Our schools in Greater London are all non-sectarian and co-educational.

At the heart of our approach is the idea of readiness – we empower our students with the skills and knowledge to thrive in a world that is changing fast. Our world-renowned curriculum includes all International Baccalaureate (IB) Programmes, and top US programmes including Advanced Placement (AP) courses and the AP Capstone and International Diplomas.

Our students leave ACS as well-rounded global citizens with the academic and emotional intelligence to empathise and engage with tomorrow's big issues, turning compassion into action as they stand ready for a future full of opportunity.

ACS is a registered UK charity (1179820). ACS undertakes a wide number of programmes to further its charitable aim to advance education, including partnerships with other organisations and offering financially assisted places to students who otherwise would be unable to attend ACS schools.

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