



Boys, Girls and Communication: Their views, confidence and why these skills matter

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2011

Transforming Lives

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Suggested reference for this report is: Clark, C. (2011). *Boys, girls and communication: Their views, confidence and why these skills matter*. London: National Literacy Trust.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the pupils and staff at the following schools without whom this study would not have been possible (in alphabetical order):

Astor College for the Arts; Barham Primary School; Beckers Green Primary School; Beeslack Community High School; Benton Park High School; Blenheim Primary School and Children's Centre; Boston Spa School; Brigidine School; Cathays High School Cardiff; Chichester High School for Girls; Copleston High School; Corby Business Academy; Crumpsall Lane Primary; De Lisle Catholic Science College; Education Village; Excelsior Academy; Heritage Park Community School (BESD); Hesleden Primary School; Holmbush Primary School; Isle of Sheppey Academy; King Edward Primary; Lambourn; Maidenhill School; Manor High School; Mayhill Junior School; Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School; Northgate Primary School; Oaklands Secondary School; Oulton Primary School; Park Junior School; Paston Ridings Primary School; Samuel Ward Arts & Technology College; Scotch Orchard Primary School; Simon de Senlis Primary School; South Camden Community School; Southwater Junior School; St Lukes Islington; St Mary Redcliffe & Temple; St Mary's CE Primary School; St Peter's RC High School; Startforth Morritt Memorial Primary School; Thomas Alleyne's High School; West Chilton Community School; White Woman Lane Junior School; Whitefield School; William Parker Sports College.

Thanks also go to Wendy Lee, Professional Director, from The Communication Trust for her invaluable advice about speaking and listening issues.

We would also like to thank The Communication Trust for their financial contribution that made this survey possible. It was commissioned as part of the *Hello* campaign; national year of communication.

Table of contents

Acknowledgements	3
Executive summary	5
Introduction to this survey	7
Methodology	8
Contextualising this report: What young people think good communication skills are by gender	8
Views on communication skills by gender.....	9
More views on communication skills by gender	10
Views on how communication skills should be acquired by gender	12
Young people’s confidence using certain communication skills by gender	12
Young people’s confidence communicating with certain groups of people by gender	14
Young people’s perception of the power of their voice by gender	15
How important do young people think communication skills are to their future life by gender ...	16
Which communication skills are the most important to succeed in life, at school, at university and in the workplace by gender.....	18
Gender differences and communication – summing up	20
References.....	21

Tables and figures

Table 1: Views on communication by gender	10
Table 2: More views on communication by gender	11
Table 3: Confidence using communication skills by gender	13
Table 4: Confidence communicating with groups of people either face-to-face or online by gender.....	14
Table 5. Importance of certain factors when communicating with others by gender.....	15
Table 6: Percentage agreement or disagreement with attitudinal items assessing how important they think their views are by gender	16
Table 7: Most important skill to succeed in life, at school, at university and in the workplace by gender.....	19
Figure 1: Young people’s understanding of good communication skills by gender.....	9
Figure 2: How communication skills should be learned.....	12
Figure 3: Which communication skills would you like to be better at by gender	14
Figure 4: One needs good communication skills in order to ... by gender	17
Figure 5: One needs good communication skills in order to ... Part 2 by gender	17
Figure 6: The most important thing in the future is ... by gender.....	18

Executive summary

This is the first large-scale survey of young people's views on communication skills in the UK. The purpose of this survey was three-fold. Since a search of the published literature had highlighted real gaps in knowledge, we wanted answers to the following questions: What do young people think about communication skills? Are they confident in their skills and how important do they think these skills are at school, in the workplace or in wider society? This report explores these issues by gender.

An online survey was conducted in June/July 2010. Overall, 6,865 young people aged 8 to 16 from 47 schools participated in our online survey. 46 were schools from England, one was from Wales. There was an almost equal gender split in the sample, with 51.5% of boys (N = 3,511) and 48.5% of girls (N = 3,309) participating in this survey.

Young people and communication skills: Gender differences

- More girls than boys believed that having good communication skills means being good at talking and being good at listening. By contrast, significantly more boys than girls believed that it means being good at ICT (Information Communication Technology).
- 5 in 10 boys compared with 4 in 10 girls strongly agreed that good communication skills boost their confidence in social situations. 3 in 10 boys compared with 2 in 10 girls also strongly agreed that good communication skills are often taken for granted and that there is the danger that they are not taken seriously if they do not express their views clearly.
- More boys than girls were also concerned that they would be seen as not very intelligent if they cannot communicate well and that people judge them by the words they use.
- While nearly as many boys as girls agreed that they had been told off for the way they speak, 3 in 10 boys compared with 2 in 10 girls strongly agreed that they have been told off for not listening.
- Slightly more boys than girls (2 in 10 vs. 1 in 10) also strongly agreed that they spend more time online or in front of the telly than talking with their family.
- While roughly the same small proportion of boys and girls agreed that a posh accent makes one a better speaker, significantly more boys (4 in 10) than girls (3 in 10) agreed overall that celebrities who speak well are more intelligent.
- Boys were more likely to take an auto-didactic approach to learning communication skills, with more boys than girls believing that children should just pick communication skills up. By contrast, more girls than boys believed that the family should help children to learn these skills.
- There were some differences between boys and girls in their confidence to use certain communication skills, with boys tending to feel more confident overall than girls. Boys were more likely than girls to say that they feel confident speaking in front of classmates, saying no to friends, talking to new people, explaining their points of view and asking

when they do not understand anything. While boys are more confident than girls in these areas, girls would like to be more confident using these skills.

- Boys were more likely than girls to say that they are confident talking with teachers and other adults. There were no significant gender differences in young people's confidence in talking with friends and family.
- Boys were more likely than girls to agree overall that it is important that they can hear the other person's voice when they are communicating with others. Boys were also more likely than girls to overall agree that it is important that they use the right words when communicating with others. By contrast, girls appear to rely more on visual cues when communicating with others, with 7 in 10 girls compared with 6 in 10 boys agreeing overall that it is important that they can see what the other person's face is doing.
- Exploring their self-esteem, boys and girls agreed on how important their opinions are to others. A similar proportion of boys and girls agreed overall that their classmates listen to what they have to say, that their point of view is important, that one should say what one thinks no matter what the situation and that one will be left out if one does not speak up. An equal proportion of girls and boys also agreed overall that adults should listen more to young people.
- An equal proportion of boys and girls said that one needs good communication skills to do well at school and at university/college. While slightly more boys than girls believed that one needs good communication skills to do well at work and to do well in general, these differences were not statistically significant.
- Boys and girls did not differ in how important they thought good communication skills are to get good qualifications, to get on with family and friends, and to have a fulfilling life, but girls (8 in 10) were more likely than boys (7 in 10) to say that one needs good communication skills to get a good job.
- When asked to select from a list the most important goal in life, girls (3 in 10) were more likely than boys (2 in 10) to say that it would be to be happy. By contrast, more boys than girls rated being successful in their job as the most important goal they would like to obtain.
- However, there was no difference between boys and girls in how important they thought good communication skills are in order to obtain this goal, with 9 in 10 boys and girls saying that good communication skills are either very important or important to reach the value that they rated as most important.
- Both boys and girls believed that speaking skills are the most important skill to have to succeed in life, though more girls (4 in 10) than boys (3 in 10) believed that. Boys were more likely than girls to believe that maths and ICT are the most important skills to succeed in life.
- Both boys and girls believed that listening skills are the most important skill to succeed at school and at university/college but again more girls than boys believed this. Again, boys were more likely than girls to say that maths and ICT are the most important skills to succeed at school and at university/college.
- The majority of girls (3 in 10) believed that the most important skill to succeed in the workplace is speaking, while the majority of boys (3 in 10) believed that listening is the most important skill to succeed at work.

Introduction to this survey

Considering recent media stories and comments, you would be forgiven for believing that young people nowadays communicate in grunts and other mono-syllabic utterances, and express themselves like TV characters Vicky Pollard or Harry Enfield's Kevin the teenager.

Employers also bemoan the lack of young people's communication skills, with many believing that it impacts on their chances of making it through an interview and their future employability. But concerns about communication skills start even in the primary years, with many school heads observing that children now start primary school without the necessary skills.

However, what is largely lacking from the debate are the views of young people. What do young people think about their communication skills? Are they confident in their skills and how important do they think these skills are at school, in the workplace or in wider society?

Since very little is known about young people's attitudes towards speaking and listening as well as wider communication skills, the purpose of this survey will be three-pronged to explore what young people think about communication skills, how confident they are in their skills and how important they think these skills are at school, in the workplace or in wider society. Some of these topics have been covered in previous small-scale qualitative studies (such as the study by The Communication Trust in 2009), but this will be the first time that the views of a large number of young people will be collected on these issues.

Answers to the above question will also form part of the evidence base to support **Hello**, which is the national year of communication, a campaign to increase understanding of how important it is for children and young people to develop good communication skills.

The campaign is run by The Communication Trust, a coalition of 40 leading voluntary sector organisations in partnership with Jean Gross, the Government's Communication Champion. Together, the aim is to make 2011 the year when children's communication skills become a priority in schools and homes across the country. The campaign is supported by BT and Pearson Assessment and is backed by the Department for Education and Department for Health.

Please visit www.hello.org.uk for further information.

Focus of the present report

The present report focuses on the potential differences between boys and girls in terms of their views of communication skills, their confidence in using them and the importance they place on them. More specifically, it explores:

- What boys and girls think good communication skills are
- What they think about communication skills
- How confident they are communicating with various people and using various skills
- How important they think good communication skills are to succeed in various aspects of life
- What the most important skills are to succeed in life, at school, at university/college and in the workplace

Methodology

An invitation to participate in this online survey was sent out in National Literacy Trust newsletters at the beginning of April.

The online survey consisted of 35 questions, exploring young people's background, preferred ways of communication, confidence using various communication skills and the importance they place on communication skills to succeed in various aspects of life. Due to the complexity of the questions and some concepts, the decision was made to restrict the age range of participating pupils to upper KS2 (9 to 11 years) and older, though schools could survey pupils as young as eight at their discretion.

68 schools expressed an interest to take part in the survey. A link to the online survey alongside guidance notes for teachers was emailed to the schools at the beginning of June 2010. The survey was online between 14 June and 2 July. It took an average of 20 minutes for young people to complete the survey. Schools were offered a school-specific summary report as an incentive to take part.

Overall, 6,865 pupils from 47 schools participated in our online survey. 46 were schools from England, one was from Wales. There was an almost equal gender split in the sample, with 51.5% of boys (N = 3,511) and 48.5% of girls (N = 3,309) participating in this survey. There were no significant differences between boys and girls in terms of age, ethnic background and whether they receive free school meals or not.

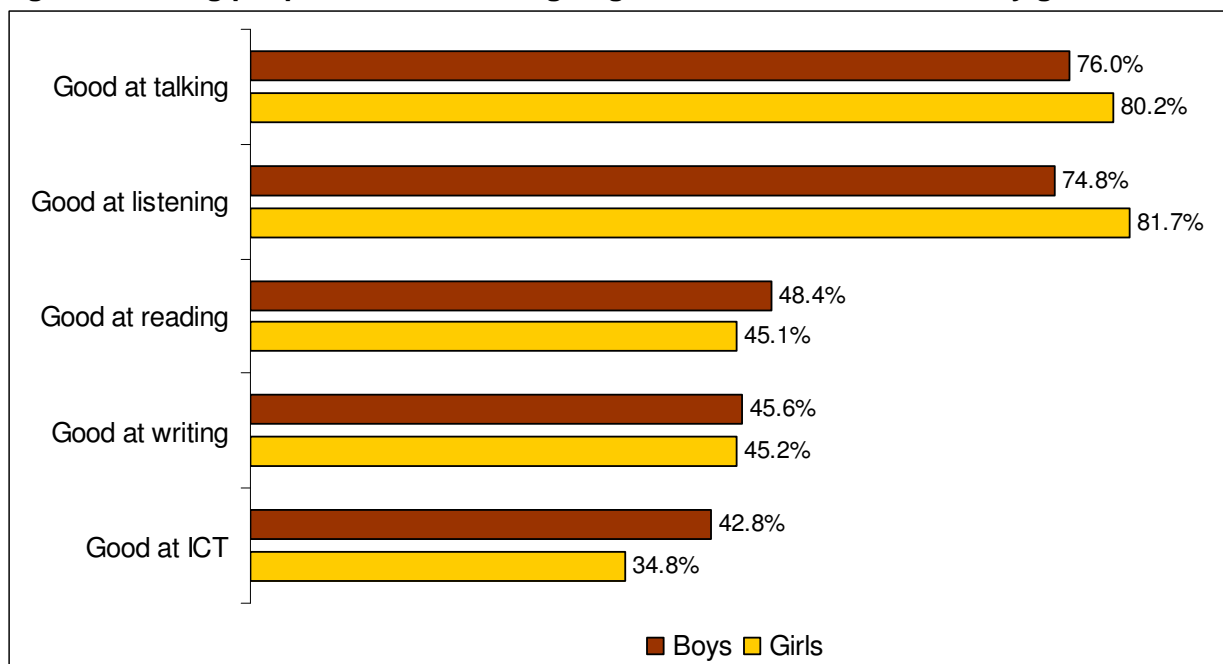
Contextualising this report: What young people think good communication skills are by gender

The purpose of this survey was three-fold. Since a search of the published literature had highlighted real gaps in knowledge, we wanted answers to the following questions: What do young people think about communication skills? Are they confident in their skills and how important do they think these skills are at school, in the workplace or in wider society?

In order to anchor responses to this survey and to get an understanding of what boys and girls think of when they hear the phrase "communication skills", they were asked to indicate what they think having good communication skills means.

Figure 1 shows that significantly more girls than boys believed that having good communication skills means being good at talking and being good at listening. By contrast, significantly more boys than girls believed that it means being good at ICT. There were no differences between boys and girls in the degree to which they believed that having good communication skills means being good at reading and writing.

Figure 1: Young people's understanding of good communication skills by gender



Views on communication skills by gender

Now knowing that both boys and girls associate good communication skills with speaking and listening, we wanted to know a little more about young people's views on communication skills, and how these views may differ depending on gender.

This section outlines boys' and girls' views about communication skills as a confidence aid in social situations, the degree to which those skills are taken for granted and the perceived relationship between good communication skills and intelligence. Views in relation to the workplace are outlined towards the end of this chapter.

Interestingly, proportionately more boys than girls agreed with the statements that assessed what they think about communication skills in terms of the confidence it affords them, whether they feel that they are taken for granted and whether there is a link with intelligence (see **Table 1**).

For example, 5 in 10 boys compared with 4 in 10 girls strongly agreed that good communication skills boost their confidence in social situations. 3 in 10 boys compared with 2 in 10 girls also strongly agreed that good communication skills are often taken for granted and that there is the danger that they are not taken seriously if they do not express their views clearly.

More boys than girls were also concerned that they would be seen as not very intelligent if they cannot communicate well and that people judge them by the words they use.

Table 1: Views on communication by gender

		Strongly agree %	Agree %	Overall agreement %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %	Do not know %
Good communication skills are some of the most important skills to have	Boys	46.7	40.9	87.6	5.1	1.2	6.0
	Girls	39.5	46.9	86.4	6.2	0.4	7.0
Good communication skills give me more confidence in social situations	Boys	46.5	41.8	88.3	3.9	1.2	6.6
	Girls	38.9	49.0	87.9	3.8	0.6	7.8
People often taken good communication skills for granted	Boys	32.1	45.3	77.4	9.9	2.1	10.6
	Girls	23.4	46.1	69.5	13.0	1.0	16.6
If I don't express my views clearly then I don't get listened to	Boys	25.4	40.5	65.9	19.5	4.8	9.9
	Girls	20.8	37.2	58.0	25.7	3.7	12.5
If I have difficulty communicating, then people might think that I am not very intelligent	Boys	21.4	36.3	57.7	24.1	8.5	9.8
	Girls	15.9	34.8	50.7	31.4	8.0	9.8
People judge you by the language (words and phrases) you use	Boys	28.8	40.2	69.0	16.5	5.0	9.4
	Girls	24.6	42.3	66.9	18.2	4.8	10.0

(Note: figures in bold indicate significant differences between boys and girls)

More views on communication skills by gender

Whereas the previous section has explored girls' and boys' views about good communication skills and how they are linked to social situations and even intelligence, this section explores in more detail how they feel about speaking and listening. For example, it investigates, among other things, whether it is easier to express oneself if one speaks face-to-face, whether having a posh accent makes one a better speaker and whether celebrities who speak well are seen as more intelligent.

Table 2 shows that a similar proportion of boys and girls agreed that it is easier to get a point across when talking face-to-face and that they are more confident to say things online or by text than they are to say certain things face-to-face.

While nearly as many boys as girls agreed that they had been told off for the way they speak, 3 in 10 boys compared with 2 in 10 girls strongly agreed that they have been told off for not listening.

Slightly more boys than girls (2 in 10 vs. 1 in 10) also strongly agreed that they spend more time online or in front of the television than they spend talking with their family.

While roughly the same small proportion of boys and girls agreed that a posh accent makes one a better speaker, significantly more boys (4 in 10) than girls (3 in 10) agreed overall that celebrities who speak well are more intelligent.

Table 2: More views on communication by gender

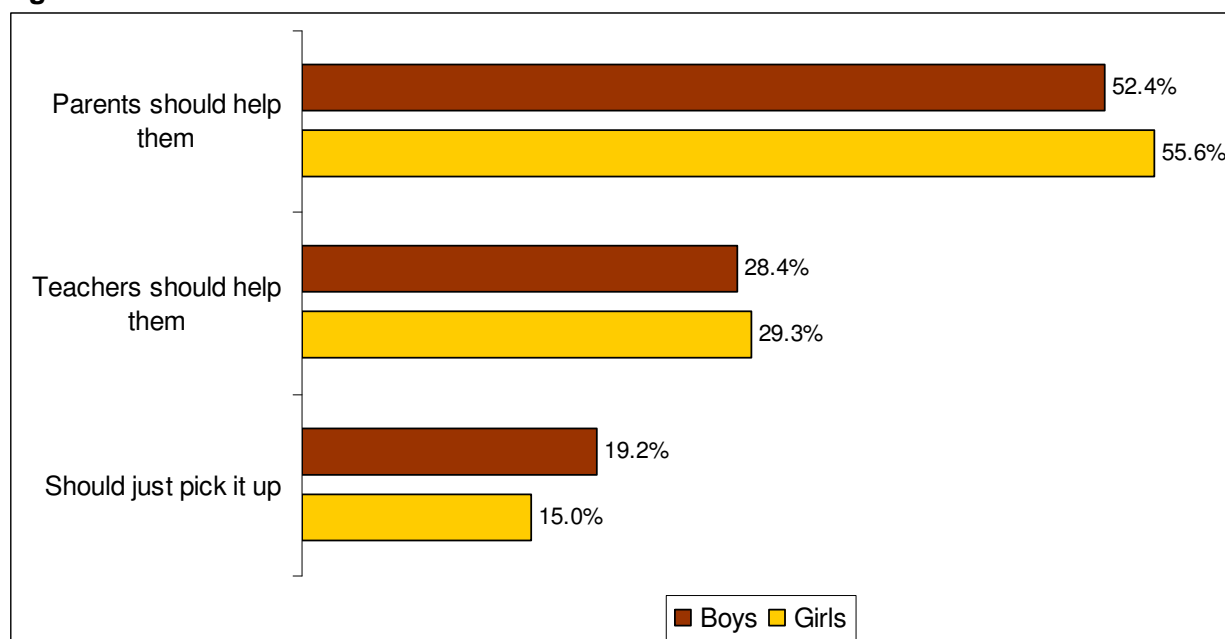
		<i>Strongly agree</i> %	<i>Agree</i> %	<i>Overall agreement</i> %	<i>Disagree</i> %	<i>Strongly disagree</i> %	<i>Do not know</i> %
It is easier to get your point across when you speak face-to-face	Boys	49.2	36.9	86.1	6.4	1.6	5.9
	Girls	47.2	40.6	87.8	5.0	1.2	6.0
Communicating online or by text gives me the confidence to say things I wouldn't say face-to-face	Boys	28.7	36.6	65.3	18.6	6.4	9.6
	Girls	28.0	40.0	68.0	18.5	5.1	8.4
I have been told off for the way I speak	Boys	17.1	28.7	45.8	25.3	19.6	9.3
	Girls	14.3	28.5	42.8	29.1	19.7	8.3
I have been told off for not listening	Boys	27.9	42.3	70.2	14.9	8.2	6.7
	Girls	18.7	44.7	63.4	18.3	9.8	8.3
I communicate with my friends more by writing than by talking	Boys	10.9	14.3	25.2	34.4	32.9	7.5
	Girls	9.2	14.3	23.5	45.2	21.6	9.7
I spend more time online and watching TV than I spend speaking to my family	Boys	17.7	25.0	42.7	32.8	14.8	9.8
	Girls	12.5	23.5	36.0	39.2	15.7	9.1
Being confident makes you a better speaker	Boys	50.5	38.3	88.8	4.7	1.9	4.6
	Girls	45.3	43.8	89.1	5.2	1.1	4.6
Having a posh accent makes you a better speaker	Boys	8.0	12.2	20.2	39.3	31.1	9.4
	Girls	5.3	14.0	19.3	46.3	26.4	8.0
I think celebrities who speak well are more intelligent	Boys	12.7	23.3	36.0	34.8	16.3	12.9
	Girls	9.4	21.9	31.3	41.5	12.3	14.9

(Note: figures in bold indicate significant differences between boys and girls)

Views on how communication skills should be acquired by gender

Do boys and girls differ in their views on how communication skills should be learned? **Figure 2** shows that boys are more likely to take an auto-didactic approach to learning communication skills, with more boys than girls believing that kids should just pick communication skills up. By contrast, more girls than boys believed that the family should help kids learn these skills.

Figure 2: How communication skills should be learned



Young people's confidence using certain communication skills by gender

This section explores whether there are any differences between boys and girls in how confident they are in using a variety of communication skills.

Table 3 shows that there are some differences between boys and girls in their confidence to use certain communication skills, with boys tending to feel more confident overall than girls. Boys are more likely than girls to say that they feel confident speaking in front of classmates, saying no to friends, talking to new people, explaining their points of view and asking when they don't understand anything. While boys are more confident than girls in these areas, **Figure 3** (p.14) shows that girls would like to be more confident using these skills.

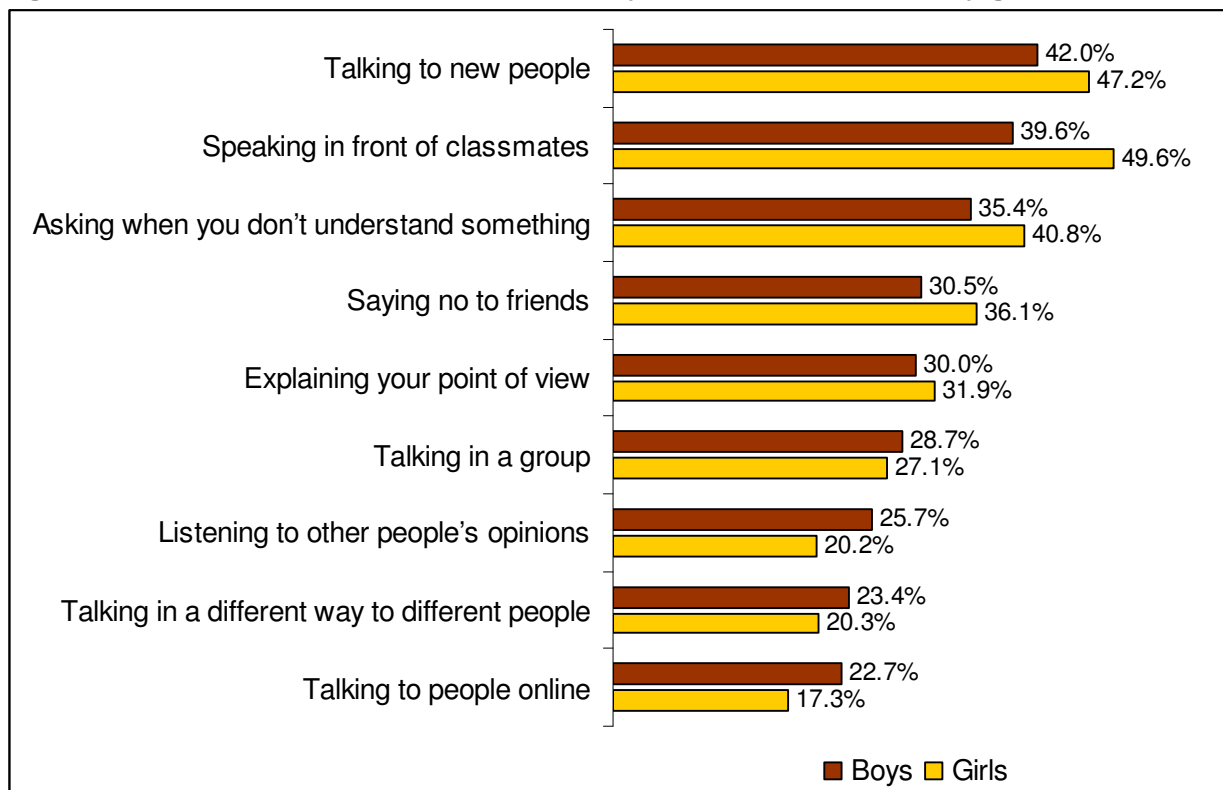
By contrast, more girls than boys say that they feel confident talking online and listening to other people's opinions and **Figure 3** shows that boys would like to gain confidence in these areas.

Table 3: Confidence using communication skills by gender

		<i>Very confident</i>	<i>Confident</i>	<i>Overall confidence</i>	<i>Not very confident</i>	<i>Not at all confident</i>	<i>Do not know</i>
		%	%	%	%	%	%
Talking in a group	Boys	43.5	41.9	85.4	9.7	1.8	3.1
	Girls	38.6	45.5	84.1	12.4	1.5	2.0
Speaking in front of classmates	Boys	30.7	38.1	68.8	21.1	6.8	3.2
	Girls	21.3	35.3	56.6	31.4	9.7	2.3
Saying no to friends	Boys	30.8	39.2	70.0	19.6	5.7	4.7
	Girls	22.2	39.4	61.6	27.1	7.8	3.6
Talking to new people	Boys	24.7	42.7	67.4	23.4	5.4	3.9
	Girls	20.5	41.5	62.0	29.9	5.4	2.8
Talking to people online	Boys	46.7	35.1	81.8	8.3	3.5	6.4
	Girls	45.5	39.1	84.6	7.7	3.2	4.5
Talking in a different way to different people	Boys	40.4	40.6	81.0	9.4	2.5	7.1
	Girls	36.8	43.4	80.2	10.8	2.0	7.0
Explaining your point of view	Boys	34.4	43.2	77.6	15.1	2.4	4.9
	Girls	29.2	44.5	73.7	20.5	2.6	3.2
Listening to other people's opinions	Boys	41.4	47.7	89.1	5.7	1.4	3.8
	Girls	43.5	49.4	92.9	3.9	0.8	2.3
Asking when you don't understand something	Boys	31.0	43.9	74.9	18.5	2.9	3.8
	Girls	24.0	44.5	68.5	25.2	3.9	2.4

(Note: figures in bold indicate significant differences between boys and girls)

Figure 3: Which communication skills would you like to be better at by gender



Young people's confidence communicating with certain groups of people by gender

In addition to learning about how confident young people are in using different skills, we also wanted to know more about their level of confidence in communication with certain groups of people. **Table 4** shows that boys were more likely than girls to say that they are confident talking with teachers and other adults. There were no significant gender differences in young people's confidence in talking with friends and family.

Table 4: Confidence communicating with groups of people either face-to-face or online by gender

		Very confident %	Confident %	Overall confidence %	Not very confident %	Not at all confident %	Do not know %
Talking with friends	Boys	76.2	20.7	96.7	1.3	0.5	1.3
	Girls	78.4	19.9	98.3	1.0	0.2	0.5
Talking with family	Boys	77.1	19.5	96.6	1.6	0.6	1.2
	Girls	76.9	20.6	97.5	1.5	0.4	0.5

		Very confident %	Confident %	Overall confidence %	Not very confident %	Not at all confident %	Do not know %
Talking with teachers	Boys	34.3	47.1	81.4	13.0	3.1	2.5
	Girls	26.9	51.0	77.9	17.6	2.5	2.0
Talking with other adults	Boys	28.1	40.9	69.0	20.2	6.4	4.5
	Girls	21.0	45.4	66.4	25.2	4.6	3.8

(Note: figures in bold indicate significant differences between boys and girls)

Importance of certain factors when communicating with others by gender

Boys were more likely than girls to agree overall that it is important that they can hear the other person's voice when they are communicating with others (see **Table 5**). Boys were also more likely than girls to overall agree that it is important that they use the right words when communicating with others. By contrast, girls appear to rely more on visual cues when communicating with others, with 7 in 10 girls compared with 6 in 10 boys agreeing overall that it is important that they can see what the other person's face is doing.

Table 5. Importance of certain factors when communicating with others by gender

		Strongly agree %	Agree %	Overall agreement %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %	Do not know %
You see what their face is doing	Boys	24.2	40.1	64.3	23.5	4.3	7.9
	Girls	23.1	45.4	68.5	22.4	2.6	6.5
You hear their voice	Boys	50.0	34.0	84.0	10.8	1.7	3.5
	Girls	44.3	34.8	79.1	16.7	1.3	2.9
You use the right words	Boys	35.5	34.6	70.1	16.9	5.4	7.7
	Girls	31.0	36.0	67.0	20.4	4.3	8.2

Young people's perception of the power of their voice by gender

Exploring their self-esteem, boys and girls agreed on how important their opinions are to others (see **Table 6**). A similar proportion of boys and girls agreed overall that their classmates listen to what they have to say, that their point of view is important, that one should say what one thinks

no matter what the situation and that one will be left out if one does not speak up. An equal proportion of girls and boys also agreed overall that adults should listen more to young people.

Table 6: Percentage agreement or disagreement with attitudinal items assessing how important they think their views are by gender

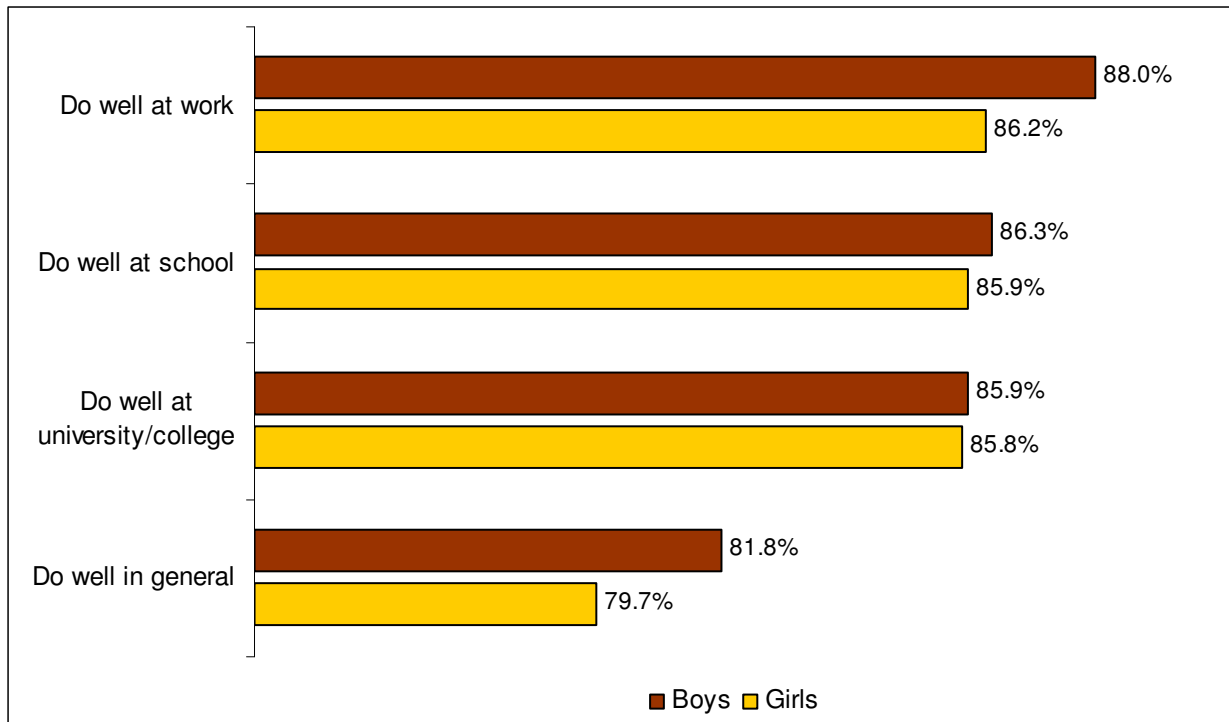
		<i>Strongly agree</i> %	<i>Agree</i> %	<i>Overall agreement</i> %	<i>Disagree</i> %	<i>Strongly disagree</i> %	<i>Do not know</i> %
My classmates listen to what I have to say	Boys	30.8	50.6	81.4	9.7	3.3	5.6
	Girls	26.6	54.6	81.2	9.4	2.4	7.0
My point of view is important	Boys	37.2	44.0	81.2	8.7	1.9	8.1
	Girls	32.9	48.1	81.0	9.0	1.3	8.8
Adults listen to me	Boys	26.6	50.5	77.1	12.9	4.8	5.3
	Girls	21.9	52.9	74.8	14.6	3.8	6.8
I should always say what I think no matter what the situation	Boys	31.5	35.2	66.7	21.6	3.7	8.0
	Girls	27.6	36.8	64.4	24.6	3.4	7.7
If I don't speak up I will get left out	Boys	28.7	37.5	66.2	21.5	5.6	6.6
	Girls	25.3	38.2	63.5	25.2	4.6	6.8
Adults should listen more to young people	Boys	48.4	36.6	85.0	6.8	2.1	6.2
	Girls	47.4	39.2	86.6	6.2	0.9	6.3

How important do young people think communication skills are to their future life by gender

Previous research has shown that young people rate reading and writing as skills they need in order to succeed in life (Clark and Douglas, 2011). Little is known about how important young people think communication skills are to succeed in various aspects of life.

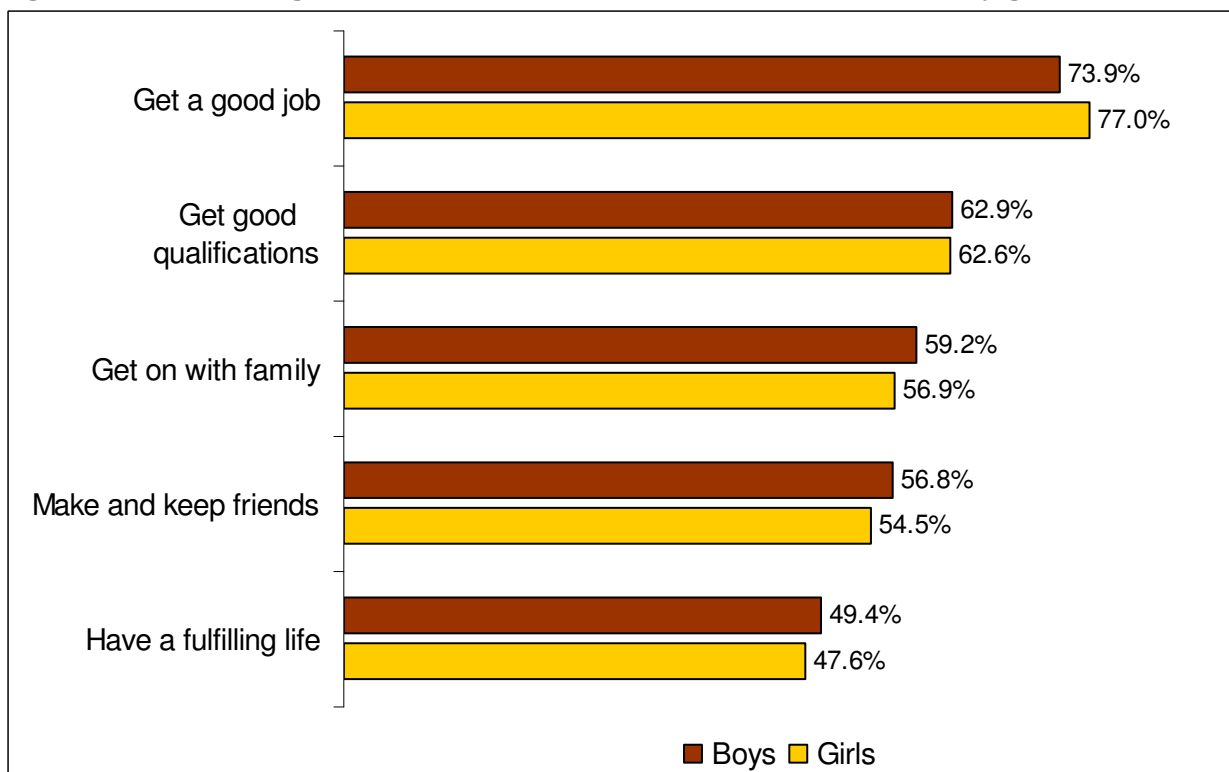
Figure 4 shows that both boys and girls agree that communication skills are important to succeed in life, with an equal proportion of boys and girls saying that one needs good communication skills to do well at school and at university/college. While slightly more boys than girls believe that one needs good communication skills to do well at work and to do well in general, these differences are not statistically significant.

Figure 4: One needs good communication skills in order to ... by gender



Looking at less abstract instances for which communication skills may be important in life, **Figure 5** shows that while boys and girls did not differ in how important they thought good communication skills are to get good qualifications, to get on with family and friends, and to have a fulfilling life, girls (8 in 10) were more likely than boys (7 in 10) to say that one needs good communication skills to get a good job.

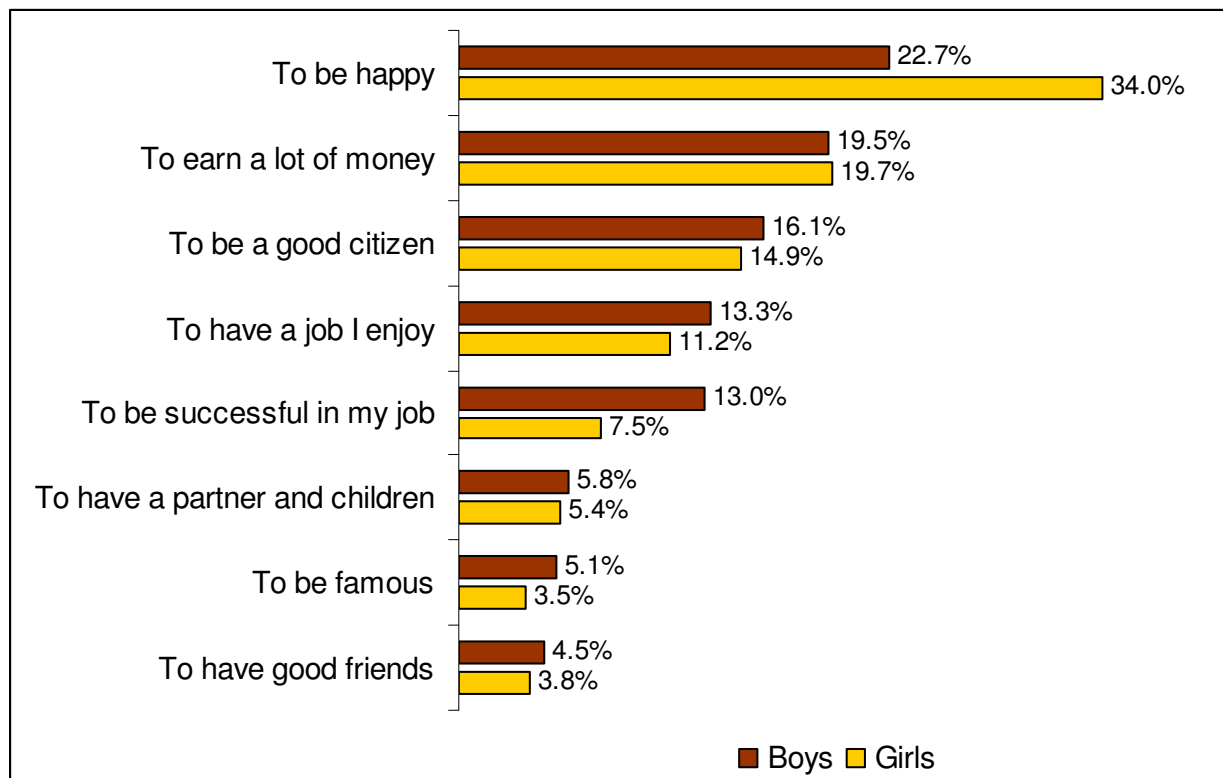
Figure 5: One needs good communication skills in order to ... Part 2 by gender



Continuing with expectations and aspirations young people have regarding their future life, they were asked to select from a list the one they valued as most important for their future life. When asked to select from a list the most important goal in life (see **Figure 6**), girls (3 in 10) were more likely than boys (2 in 10) to say that it would be to be happy. By contrast, more boys than girls rated being successful in their job as the most important goal they would like to obtain.

However, there was no difference between boys and girls in how important they thought that good communication skills are to obtain this goal, with 9 in 10 boys and girls saying that good communication skills are either very important or important to reach the value that they rated as most important.

Figure 6: The most important thing in the future is ... by gender



Which communication skills are the most important to succeed in life, at school, at university and in the workplace by gender

An equal proportion of boys and girls believed that communication skills are important to attain their prime goal in their future life. Delving a bit deeper we also wanted to know whether there were any gender differences in the degree to which certain skills are seen as the MOST important to do well in life, at school, at university, and in the workplace. Concurrently, we also wanted to see whether speaking and listening are still rated as important skills or whether they take on a lesser position if they are embedded within other essential skills, such as reading.

Table 7 shows that both boys and girls believed that speaking skills are the most important skill to have to succeed in life. However, more girls (4 in 10) than boys (3 in 10) believed that. Boys

were more likely than girls to believe that maths and ICT are the most important skills to succeed in life.

Both boys and girls believed that listening skills are the most important skill to succeed at school and at university/college but again more girls than boys believed this. Again, boys were more likely than girls to say that maths and ICT are the most important skills to succeed at school and at university/college.

The majority of girls (3 in 10) believed that the most important skill to succeed in the workplace is speaking, while the majority of boys (3 in 10) believed that listening is the most important skill to succeed at work.

Table 7: Most important skill to succeed in life, at school, at university and in the workplace by gender

		<i>Life in general</i> %	<i>At school</i> %	<i>At university</i> %	<i>In the workplace</i> %
Reading	Boys	6.2	7.1	7.4	6.3
	Girls	5.7	8.9	8.1	5.5
Writing	Boys	5.6	12.2	15.3	8.5
	Girls	5.1	13.1	16.7	9.5
Speaking	Boys	30.2	16.7	17.9	23.6
	Girls	39.4	20.5	22.6	29.9
Listening	Boys	20.1	29.2	25.5	25.0
	Girls	24.2	34.3	29.5	26.9
Maths	Boys	19.4	20.0	15.4	13.8
	Girls	13.6	13.9	11.2	10.0
ICT	Boys	10.2	8.1	11.4	14.1
	Girls	3.7	3.2	5.4	9.0

(Note: figures in bold indicate significant differences between boys and girls)

Gender differences and communication – summing up

While boys and girls agreed on the importance of good communication skills to succeed in life, at school, at university/college and in the workplace, there were some interesting differences between girls and boys in terms of their understanding of what good communication skills are, how they view these skills and how confident they are using certain communication skills.

It is perhaps particularly interesting that boys generally rate themselves as more confident communicators with people in authority (teachers) as well as known and unknown adults than do girls. Boys also appear to be more concerned about the social implications of communication, being more concerned than girls about a perceived link between communication and intelligence for example.

References

Clark, C and Douglas, J. (2011). *Young People's Reading and Writing*. London: National Literacy Trust.

The Communication Trust (2009). *Children and Young People's Views: What do children and young people think about speech, language and communication skills?* Accessed from <http://www.ican.org.uk/communication%20trust/~media/Communication%20Trust/Documents/Childrens%20Consultation%20FINAL%20Oct%202009.ashx>.