Hark

Listen Up Report

Inside the UK's Youth Confidence Crisis

What's inside

Introduction

Confidence isn't just a feeling. **It's a foundation**

And right now, too many young people in the UK are missing it.

At **Hark**, we work with brands, schools and organisations to deeply understand what matters to young people — and what's holding them back.

Every year, we run **Listen Up**, a national youth insight project built to amplify the voices that are too often overlooked.

This year's focus? **Confidence**. How young people feel about themselves, and how that shapes the way they learn, connect, speak up, and show up.

Because when young people lose confidence, they don't just go quiet. They start to disappear from the conversation entirely.

Who we heard from

1,454 voices

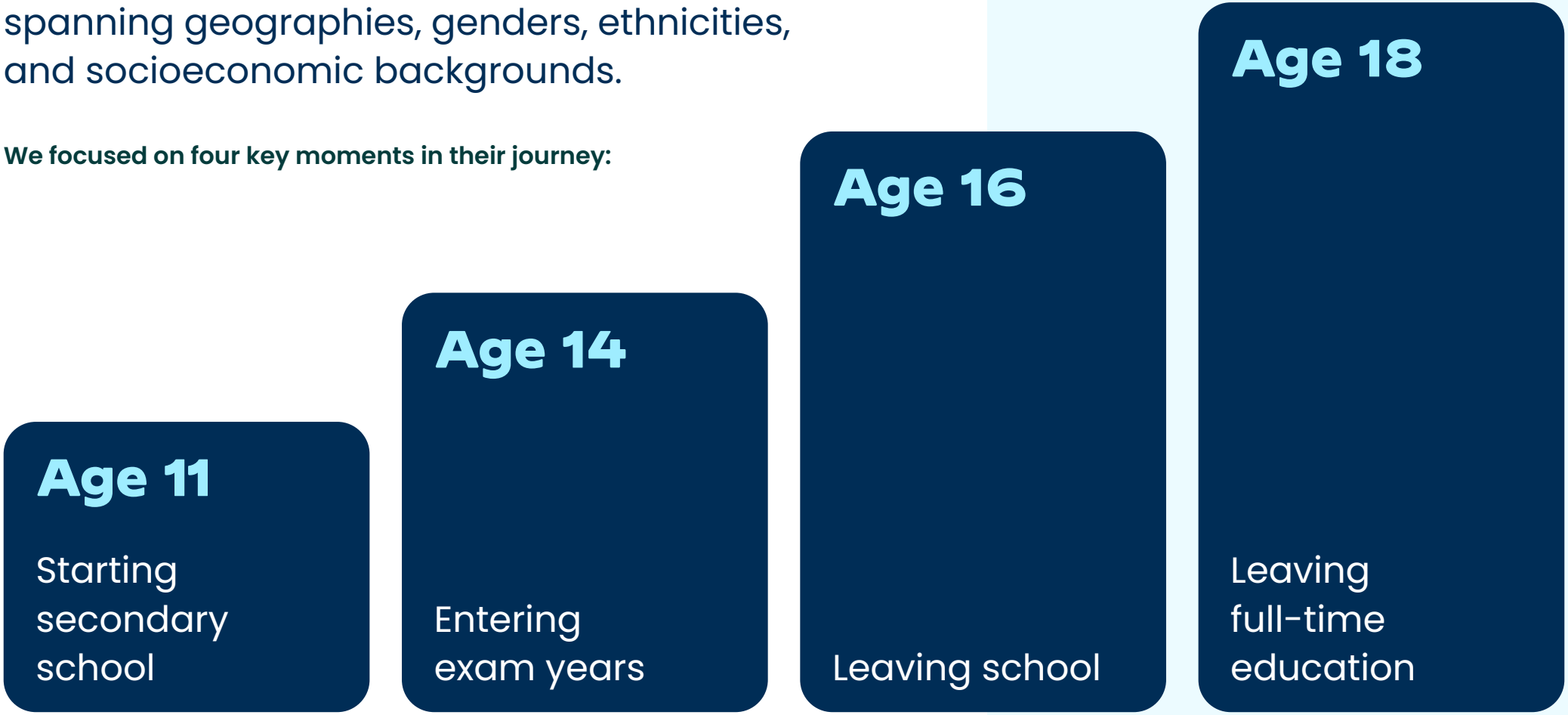
4 life stages

Nationwide insight

Our demographics

This year's Listen Up survey reached over 1,400 young people across the UK spanning geographies, genders, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

We focused on four key moments in their journey:



The Confidence Crisis

A generation missing confidence – and missing out

The scale of the problem

1 in 3 young people have little or no confidence

That's more than 2,000,000 young people in the UK

That's up to
ten in every classroom.

Confidence shapes everything. From how young people participate in school to how they build relationships or imagine their future.

And 1 in 3 are missing out; not because they lack potential, but because **they don't believe in themselves**.

What no confidence looks like

Low confidence looks like:

- Not putting up your hand
- Not taking part in activities
- Staying silent in front of new people

Which affects:

- Who asks for help
- Who gets noticed
- Who feels like they belong

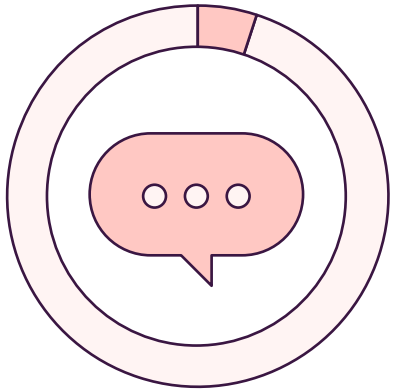
This is more than just insecurity. It's a barrier to opportunity.

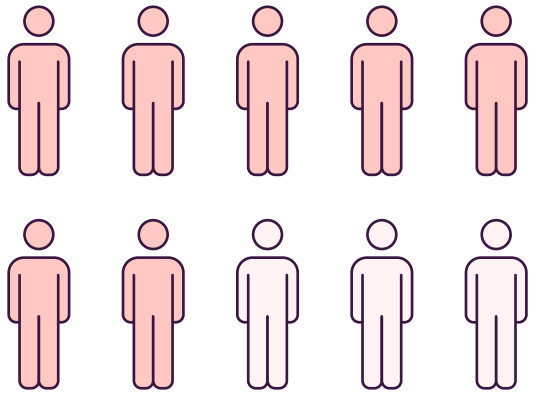
Having no confidence makes me **feel really sad and not happy with myself**, because I don't believe in myself. It stops me doing things I haven't tried yet, like sports I haven't done before. When I was out with my friends, we went to a sushi place but I was too scared to eat anything. **I didn't feel confident**. And I love sushi.

Mia, 11

All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the young people who were surveyed.

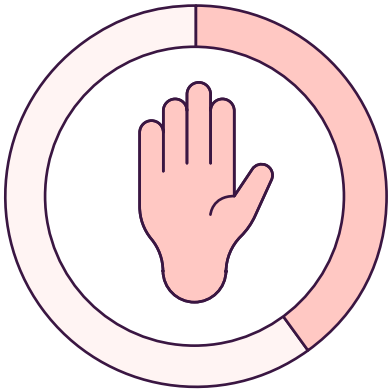
Only **5% of young people** with no confidence frequently speak to people their own age without already knowing them.





7 in 10 non-confident young people feel unable to speak to unfamiliar adults compared to just **29% of their more confident peers**.

40% of young people with no confidence never put their hand up in class, even if they know the answer.



The unheard third

The least likely to speak up.
The most likely to fall behind.
The most likely to miss out entirely.

These are the young people being missed.
Not because they aren't capable,
but because they **aren't confident**.

The unheard third

Children lacking in confidence are the least seen and the least heard. In school, in friendships, and in opportunities.

- They're not the ones putting their hands up.
- They're not joining clubs.
- They're not speaking up, even when they have something to say.

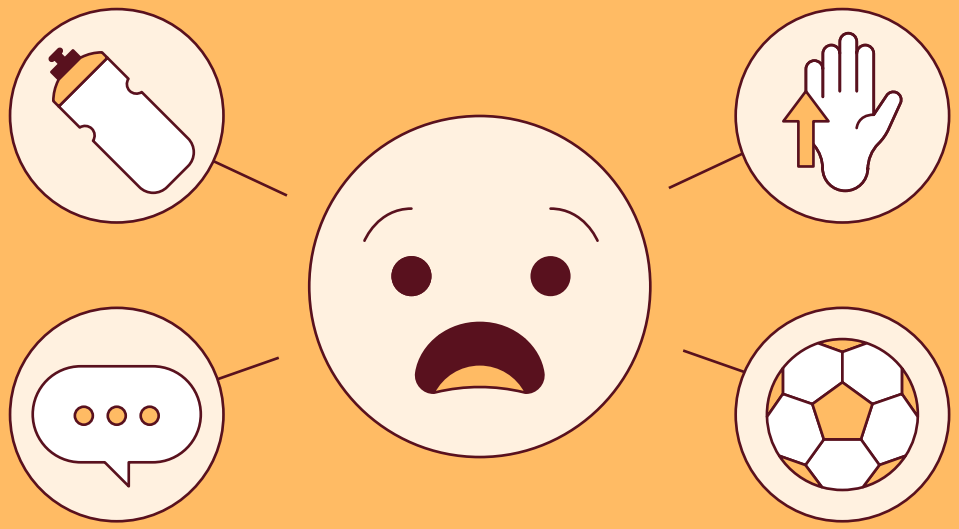
Meanwhile, their more confident peers are more likely to be:

- Chosen for leadership roles.
- Selected for placements.
- Encouraged to step forward.

Invisibility becomes a cycle.

The quieter you are, the more you're overlooked.

And the more you're overlooked, the more confidence you lose.



Two-thirds of young people with low confidence don't take part in clubs or activities.

Less than a quarter of confident young people miss out on the same.

"I avoid talking in lessons because I fear getting stuff wrong and I'm very shy speaking in front of people.

I don't do much outside of school because I'm not confident in talking to people and I'm too anxious to try new things."

Sophie, 16

All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the young people who were surveyed.

Who's being left behind?

Unheard girls

34% of girls say they have little to no confidence compared with **27%** of boys.

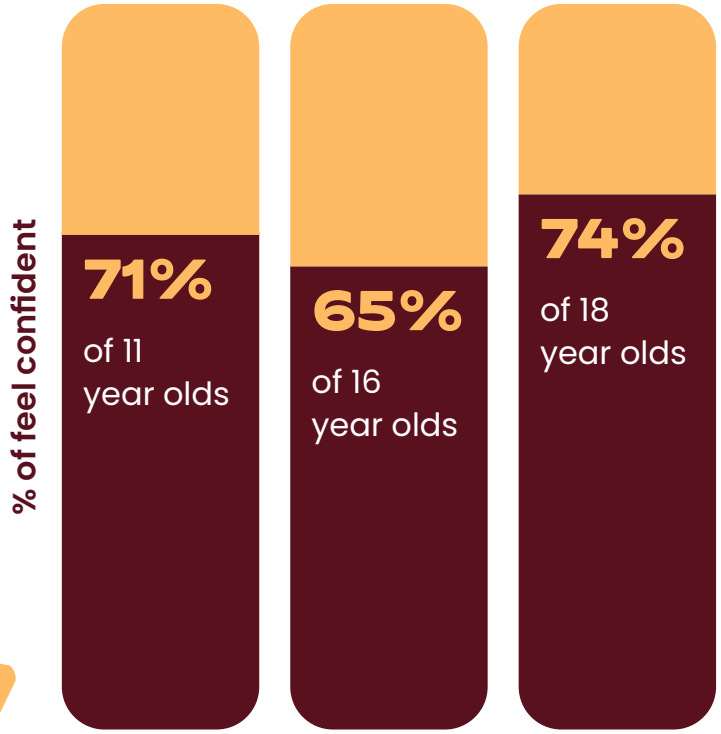
Unheard backgrounds

37% of those from lower socioeconomic groups say they have little or no confidence compared to **27%** of their peers from more affluent backgrounds.

Each of these groups reports **consistently lower confidence** than their peers.

Unheard ages

While 71% of young people feel confident at the start of secondary school, this dips by the time they leave school at 16.



A confidence gap shaped by place

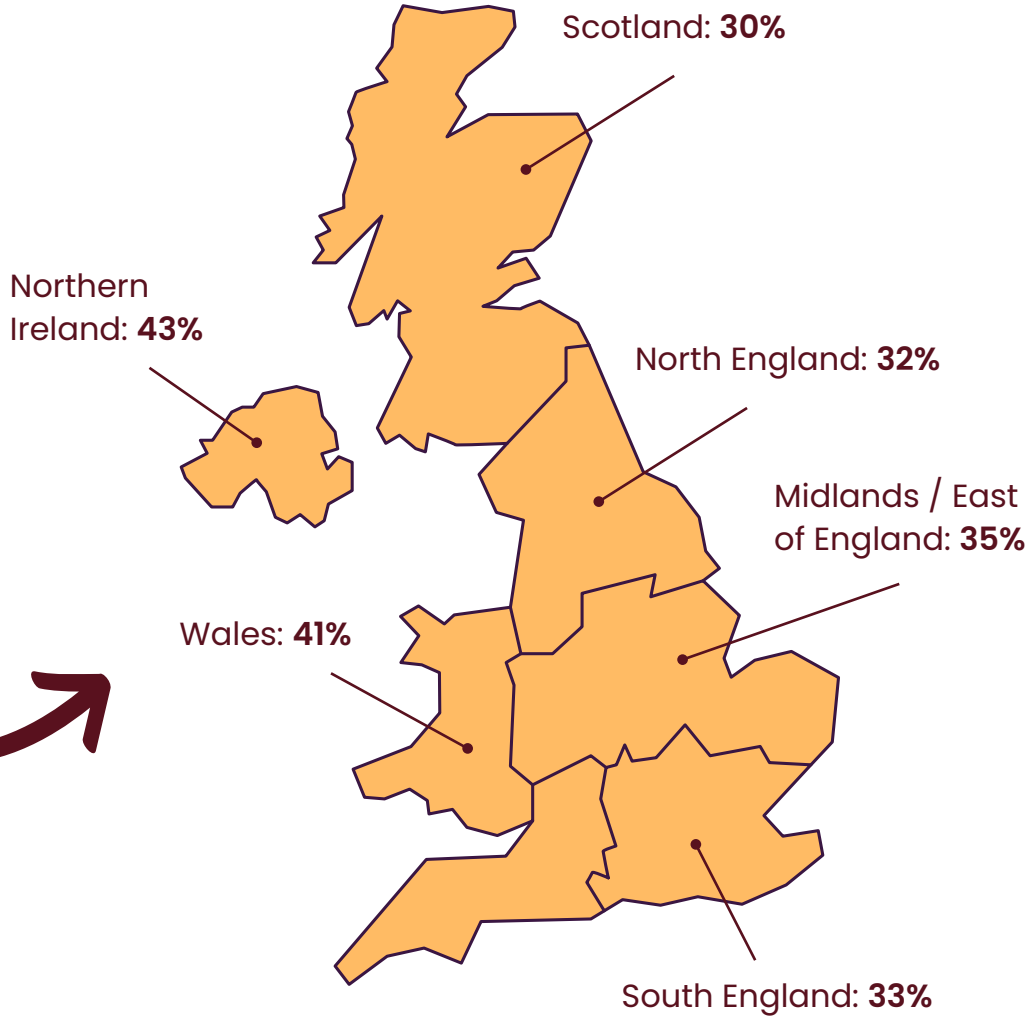
The **confidence gap** isn't evenly spread across the country.

Confidence levels are notably higher in London, where **87%** of young people say they feel very or quite confident - the highest of any region surveyed.

In contrast, young people in Northern Ireland, Wales and parts of the Midlands are far more likely to report low confidence.

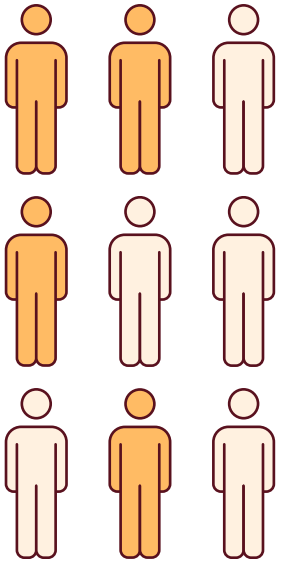
Young people in regions such as the North of England and South of England also report lower levels of confidence compared to the London average.

Percentage of young people with little to no confidence by area



Girls making themselves smaller

We often hear the phrase '**fake it till you make it**'. Acting more confident than we really feel can help us all to perform in high-pressure situations. **But it turns out that young people, and girls in particular, are doing the opposite.**



Almost 1 in 2 of all girls (44%) told us that they pretend to be less confident than they feel.

The main reason they do this is so that people don't think they're showing off.

Young girls are shrinking away from the attention that may come from being confident. In doing so, they are making their voices even quieter, and allowing themselves to be heard even less.

These are the girls that are afraid to speak up for themselves. The ones who won't risk giving a wrong answer, or being judged by their peers.

It's time we taught our girls to embrace their voices.

"I often try to avoid showing off, like in lessons, by not contributing much. I also feel like I sometimes try to act dumber than I am so as to not feel like I'm showing off."

Chloe, 16

Presenting as '**less confident**' or more subdued can feel like the safest way for girls to navigate social and educational spaces, as being confident through expressing their views and opinions can often be judged negatively. I have heard various stories of Black girls in particular being misinterpreted as being '**rude**' or '**displaying an attitude**' rather than Black girls who are passionate and assertive. To avoid negative judgement or conflict, being '**less than**' can become a protective coping mechanism.

Nadine Bernard, Headteacher and CEO of Aspiring Heads

The cost of an unheard generation

Counting costs **beyond the classroom**

The cost of an unheard generation

Confidence gaps aren't personality quirks.

They're social patterns, and they shape who gets seen, supported, and given opportunities.

When the most disadvantaged young people are also the least confident, they start behind — and fall further behind.

I feel strongly that there is a crisis of confidence in many young people across our education system today. Whether that be the impact of COVID-19, the pressure of living up to an 'online persona' or fear of what is going on across the world where expressing feelings and thoughts no longer feels safe, I am not sure. What I do know however is that **in schools this is stifling engagement, participation, freedom of expression and the opportunity to experiment with identity**. As a parent and a teacher, it is truly heartbreaking to see young people struggle with confidence, doubting themselves or simply not putting themselves out here.

Whatever we can learn and apply in schools to address this is much needed.

Tom Campbell, CEO at EACT

Can’t speak. Can’t succeed.

Confidence directly affects communication, and communication affects access.

67%

of young people with no confidence say they never talk to unfamiliar adults

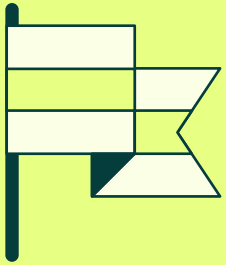
Only 7%

of **non-confident youth** express their opinions frequently

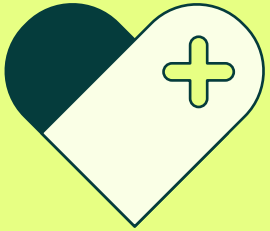
The real-world cost for young people

Without confidence, young people miss:

Job interviews

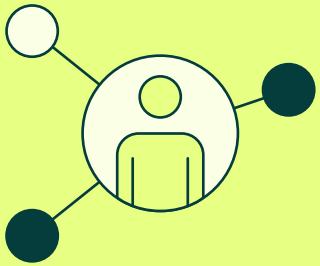


Leadership roles



Friendships

Creative risks



Networking

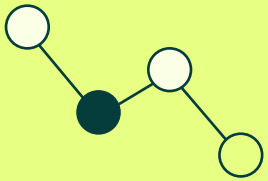
If we're not listening, we're not just failing them in school. We're failing them for life.

The cost for businesses

The cost of an unheard generation goes beyond the classroom.

Transferable skills gaps

Missed talent



Less diversity of thought

Burnout and dropout risks

Employers are seeing it too

Apprenticeship providers, FE institutions, recruiters and businesses are already reporting:

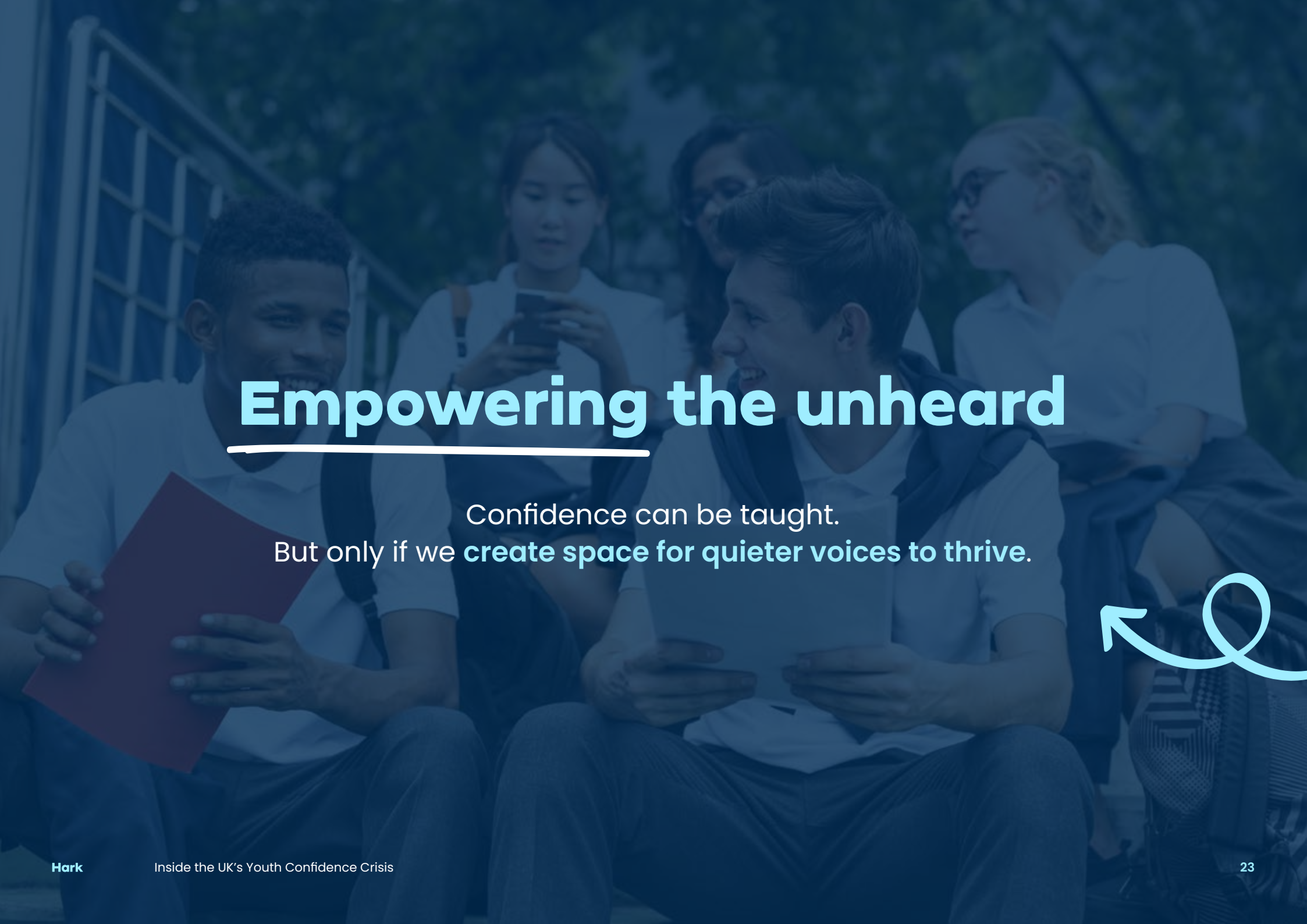
Fewer young people speaking up in interviews

Rising anxiety and self-doubt

High potential, low visibility

Working closely with young people entering the workforce, I've seen how **confidence can transform a person's trajectory**. I remember one apprentice who barely spoke in their first week—nervous, unsure, constantly second-guessing. But with the right support and encouragement, they found their voice, led a team project, and even presented to senior leaders by the end of their placement. **Confidence isn't about being the loudest in the room, it's about believing you belong there**. And when communication skills are missing, it's like having something important to say but no way to say it, it limits connection, growth, and impact.

Bal Atwal, Early Talent Expert at E.ON UK



Empowering the unheard

Confidence can be taught.
But only if we **create space for quieter voices to thrive**.

How schools, employers, and youth organisations can help

If we want to build a generation that's ready to lead, collaborate, and thrive — **confidence needs to be built, not assumed**.

We all have a crucial role to play:

Develop transferable skills early

Help young people build confidence in networking, self-expression, speaking up, and self-belief.

Make initiatives more inclusive

Don't just reward the loudest, but actively include those who need support to step forward.

Celebrate all kinds of progress

Spot potential in those still developing, not just confidence or academic achievement.

Invest where it counts

Whether it's through early careers schemes, education partnerships, or community-led programmes – every investment in youth is an investment in future talent.

It’s time to listen louder!

Confidence isn’t just built in classrooms, it’s shaped in boardrooms too.

If your organisation wants to help raise a more confident generation by listening, investing, and taking action – we’d love to talk.


Hark
We don’t wait for the future.
We shape it, with the
next generation.
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harklondon.com