

ISA Awards 2024 Case Study: Award for Excellence and Innovation in Early Years



LITTLE DOWNSEND SCHOOL

MAY 2025

History of the School

Little Downsend is a family of three Nursery and Pre-Prep schools located in Leatherhead, Ashted, and Epsom. These schools form the early years foundation of Downsend School, part of the Cognita Schools Group, and are known for their innovative and holistic approach to early childhood education. Little Downsend caters to children aged 2 to 7 years, providing an environment where children are inspired to explore, question, and discover through a dynamic curriculum built around play, creativity, and foundational excellence.

Rooted in a long-standing commitment to excellence and innovation, Little Downsend has consistently championed an education that prepares children not only for the next stage of school but for life beyond. The Early Years settings are vibrant, nurturing, and forward-thinking, with learning environments that reflect the belief that children learn best through meaningful, hands-on experiences.

Little Downsend's curriculum is shaped by its pioneering "Future Skills" vision, which threads through every area of school life. The vision focuses on:

- Brilliant Basics – core literacy and numeracy skills
- Global Thinking – awareness of the wider world
- Emotional Intelligence – social and emotional development
- Creativity – imaginative thinking and self-expression
- Digital Leadership – responsible and confident technology use

This ethos empowers children from their earliest years to develop as curious, capable, and compassionate learners.



Ian Thorpe
Executive Head



Lisa Burns
Head of Little Downsend



<https://www.downsend.co.uk>

Aims

At the heart of Little Downsend's Early Years strategy is the belief that young children are competent, capable learners. The school seeks to ignite a lifelong love of learning by fostering an environment where creativity, communication, and core skills are developed simultaneously through carefully designed experiences.

The school's approach to early writing development, which was central to its ISA Award for Excellence and Innovation in Early Years, is built around three interconnected pillars:

1. Developing Physical Skills for Writing

Recognising that successful writing begins with physical readiness, Little Downsend has implemented a comprehensive programme to build both gross and fine motor skills:

- The Write Dance programme incorporates large movements set to music using materials such as foam, chalk, flour, and paint. This creative physicality builds muscle memory and coordination, laying the groundwork for correct letter formation.
- Activities using Tuff Trays filled with sensory materials help refine fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination.
- Forest School sessions and outdoor play spaces encourage climbing, digging, cycling, and balancing, which strengthen core muscles, promote dexterity, and contribute to overall physical development.
- Activities such as threading, puzzles, messy play, and "tummy time" drawing further develop precision and control in even the youngest learners.

2. Fostering a Purpose to Write

Motivation and engagement are crucial to early literacy. Little Downsend has had great success with integrating writing into purposeful, imaginative contexts:

- Message Centres are flexible writing stations placed in various play areas—like cafés, airports, train stations, and construction sites—where children naturally write for meaning as part of their play.
- Children create tickets, menus, signs, and itineraries, driven by their role-play adventures.
- Adults actively participate in this play, modelling writing and gently scaffolding literacy learning in real time.



This purposeful, play-based model gives children a reason to write and helps them to see themselves as writers from the earliest age.

3. Nurturing Language, Vocabulary, and Structure

Little Downsend's literacy strategy includes an explicit focus on vocabulary enrichment and narrative understanding:

- Talk 4 Writing is embedded from age two. Children begin by retelling familiar stories using gestures and story maps, progressing to inventing and writing their own tales.
- ECAT (Every Child A Talker) sessions encourage high-quality spoken language through treasure boxes, storytelling prompts, and vocabulary-building games.
- Drama and Role Play, including workshops with older Downsend pupils, bring topics to life. For example, Reception children learned about space by participating in an astronaut-themed drama session with Year 10 students, then wrote their own space adventures.

These integrated experiences give children the narrative fluency and expressive vocabulary needed to become confident communicators and writers.

OUTCOMES

Little Downsend's commitment to holistic and innovative Early Years education has delivered great results:

- In 2023–2024, 92% of 3–4 year olds achieved or exceeded age-related expectations in fine motor control, with 29% exceeding expectations.
- In writing, 92% of 4–5 year olds met or exceeded expectations, with 25% surpassing them. The quality of vocabulary and complexity of stories were noted to be well above age-related expectations.
- An ISI inspection report (June 2022) for Little Downsend Epsom noted “highly imaginative vocabulary and very effective use of different writing techniques,” while Little Downsend Leatherhead was praised for fostering “ardent story writers and tellers.”
- Children's writing displayed throughout the settings demonstrates a striking blend of creativity, empathy, and structural sophistication—more typically seen in much older pupils.

Equally important, Little Downsend fosters a love of learning that is visible in children's engagement, confidence, and curiosity. Whether climbing a tree, writing a café menu, or narrating a story through drama, children thrive in an environment designed to bring learning to life.





T NEXT STEPS

Little Downsend continues to look ahead, exploring new ways to deepen its impact on Early Years education. Current and future priorities include:

- **Digital Storytelling:** Expanding the use of digital tools to allow children to author and publish multimedia stories, strengthening their confidence and digital literacy.
- **Outreach and Community Impact:** Sharing best practices with local nurseries and schools through professional development, observation visits, and collaborative projects.
- **Sustainability and Global Citizenship:** Embedding environmental education and global thinking across Early Years projects to help children understand their place in a wider world.
- **Shaping incredible people:** ensuring every learner is supported to be confident, resilient and to realise their full potential.

Through this forward-looking approach, Little Downsend aims to remain at the forefront of Early Years innovation, cultivating not only academic excellence but also compassion, resilience, and readiness for the future.

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