Health and Human Services

Iowa Department of Health And Human Services

CHILD CARE CENTER ANNUAL EVALUATION

Name of Center: Carousel Preschool and Daycare

Provider No.: 29230

Address: 3575 Zenith Ave, Spirit Lake, IA, 51360

County: Dickinson

Director's Name: Darcy Sundall

On-Site Supervisor: Molly Scott

Phone Number: 7123395947

E-Mail: darcysundall@gmail.com

HHS Visit Date: 06/30/2026

Licensing Period: 07/01/2025 to 07/01/2027

Fire Inspection:

Date Inspected: 07/01/2026

Comments: This childcare will be expanding near the end of July, and an updated capacity will be completed at that time.

Report Visit Type:

- [ ] PTO
- [X] Licensing Visit
- [ ] Drop In
- [ ] Administrative Change

License Type:

- [X] Full
- [ ] Provisional

Quality initiative:

Quality Rating: 4

- [ ] Accrediation

Program Duration:

- [X] Year-Round
- [ ] School Year
- [ ] Summer Only

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HOURS:	*Year-round*	*School-Year*	*Summer Only*
Sunday			
Monday	6:15 AM to 5:30 PM		
Tuesday	6:15 AM to 5:30 PM		
Wednesday	6:15 AM to 5:30 PM		
Thursday	6:15 AM to 5:30 PM		
Friday	6:15 AM to 5:30 PM		
Saturday			

Program Population Served:

- [X] Infant(0-<24 Months)
- [X] Toddler
- [X] PreSchool
- [ ] School Age
- [ ] All Ages

LICENSE CAPACITY	Infants	2 Years	Preschool	School-Aged	Capacity
General	24	67	23		114
Summer					0

1. Basic Overview

On June 29, 2026, I conducted an unannounced visit at Carousel Preschool & Daycare Center in Spirit Lake, Iowa. During my time at the center, I had the opportunity to speak with Darcy Sundall, the owner and Director. Ms. Sundall welcomed the conversation and provided helpful insight into the program's daily operations. She holds a four-year degree from Wayne State College and has completed numerous nature-based early childhood education trainings, which strongly influence the philosophy and learning environment she strives to create. Her commitment to ongoing professional development was evident and reflects positively on the center's approach to supporting children's growth.

The building that houses Carousel Preschool & Daycare Center was constructed specifically to meet the needs of a preschool and childcare program. The center features four age-appropriate classrooms, including an infant room (birth to 10 months), a 10-month to 2-year-old room, a 2- to 3-year-old room, and a 3- to 4-year-old preschool classroom. The center also offers year-round preschool services for children ages 3 and 4, providing families with consistent early learning opportunities throughout the year. The center operates Monday through Friday from 6:15 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., offering a schedule that supports working families and promotes dependable daily routines for children. Ms. Sundall also shared that the program is in the process of expanding. A newly constructed building, located on the same property, is expected to open in early August 2026. This expansion will allow for upcoming classroom transitions and will offer families an even more convenient and accessible drop-off and pick-up experience. Her enthusiasm for the improvements reflects the center's ongoing commitment to creating a nurturing and well-designed environment for the children and families they serve.

At the time of my visit, 62 children were enrolled in the program, with 44 children present and actively engaged in their daily routines. The level of participation and activity observed contributed to a lively, welcoming atmosphere within the center. All areas of the program were observed. These areas observed consisted of classroom observations and activities,

nutritional practices, health and safety practices, playground observation, field trip and transportation practices, and administrative review.

A welcoming bulletin board displayed photos of the teachers, their families, and brief information about each staff member, adding a personal and inviting touch to the environment. The center follows a nature-based education philosophy, which was evident in both the classroom environment and the activities described by Ms. Sundall. This approach emphasizes regular engagement with the natural world and encourages children to learn through exploration, curiosity, and hands-on experiences outdoors. Nature-based programming supports the development of problem-solving skills, creativity, and independence by allowing children to interact with natural materials, observe seasonal changes, and participate in activities that strengthen their connection to the environment. Ms. Sundall's training as well as her staff in nature-based education contributes to the thoughtful design of the program. Her commitment to this approach reflects the center's belief that children thrive when given meaningful opportunities to explore, play, and learn in ways that nurture both their development and their relationship with the natural world.

The center utilizes both the Creative Curriculum and the High Scope approach, two well-established early childhood frameworks that support child-led exploration, purposeful play, and developmentally appropriate learning. These curricula emphasize active engagement, hands-on experiences, and meaningful interactions between children and staff. Together, they provide a strong foundation for building children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills in a warm and responsive environment. During my visit, I observed that the daily schedule of activities was clearly posted, offering structure and consistency for both children and staff. The classrooms displayed a variety of visual aids and materials that reflect the center's nature-based philosophy, reinforcing learning through real-world, sensory-rich experiences. Many photos showcased children using natural materials—such as flowers, sticks, stones, and leaves—to create letters, numbers, and other meaningful learning projects. These activities highlight the center's commitment to blending nature-based learning with established early childhood curriculum models, providing children with opportunities to explore, create, and learn in deeply engaging and developmentally supportive ways.

The refrigerator was clean and maintained at the appropriate temperature. Good food storage and sanitation is in place The center currently follows CACFP nutrition guidelines, and the menus were posted for families to review. Nutritious meals and snacks are prepared onsite in a kitchen that remains secure and inaccessible to children, ensuring a safe food preparation environment. In addition, all medications are stored securely, either in a locked box or kept out of children's reach.

The center's playground is designed with a nature-themed layout. Staff shared that the children spend a generous amount of time outdoors whenever the weather allows. The outdoor space is truly unique—more like a child-friendly nature trail than a traditional playground. It features a variety of interesting natural elements, including small bridges, pathways, and areas that encourage exploration, imagination, and connection with the natural world. This thoughtful design aligns beautifully with the center's commitment to nature-based learning and provides children with rich opportunities for discovery and play. The outdoor environment includes a shaded shelter area for children ages two and older, providing a comfortable space for play during sunny weather. The infant playground also offers adequate shade, and its turf surfacing creates a safe and cushioned area for younger children. The playground for older children features a swing set and climbing structure with rubber mulch surfacing, supporting both safety and active play. The center also provides a designated riding area where children can ride bikes and toy cars, along with a sandbox and several thoughtfully designed nature-exploration areas. These additions encourage movement, sensory play, and outdoor discovery. The center does not transport children; instead, they walk to local field trip destinations, allowing children to stay connected with their community in a safe and developmentally appropriate way.

The goal of this program is to open their new additional building by the beginning of August.

Darcy shared that one of her personal goals is to have Governor Reynolds visit the center, giving her the opportunity to highlight how investments in childcare and continuity of care have positively impacted families and communities throughout the state of Iowa.

2. Identify Observed Strengths of the program

Darcy and her staff exemplify a childcare program that is truly committed to providing high-quality care. They actively participate in professional development and quality-improvement initiatives such as IQ4K, TEACH, and WAGE, and most staff members have earned their CDA credential. Their dedication to ongoing learning and growth reflects the center's strong focus on maintaining a nurturing, professional, and supportive environment for the children and families they serve.

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They recently achieved IQ4K Level 4, which reflects a strong commitment to quality improvement. Reaching this level demonstrates that the center consistently meets high standards in areas such as staff training, curriculum, family engagement, and program practices. This accomplishment highlights the dedication of Darcy and her team to maintaining a high-quality learning environment for children.

This center has used State funding to thoughtfully develop a unique and innovative approach to childcare. Darcy and her staff are highly engaged and demonstrate a strong commitment to professional growth from the beginning of their employment. They consistently seek out more than the required training and participate in support programs that enhance both their skills and financial stability. Darcy places great value on building strong relationships with her staff, encouraging them by connecting them with programs that increase their knowledge and wages. She also shows appreciation through gestures such as providing paid time off.

The atmosphere within the center is very positive. Every staff member greeted me during my visit and engaged in friendly, knowledgeable conversation. Their enthusiasm and shared philosophy of care were evident, creating a warm and welcoming environment for both children and families.

Darcy is forward-thinking and continually looks for ways to strengthen staff retention and well-being. She recognizes that access to affordable employee insurance is a major factor in staff longevity. One idea she has been exploring is the possibility of registered child care centers partnering together to secure a shared insurance provider, which could make coverage more affordable and accessible for child care staff statewide. She sees this as the “missing link” in supporting the workforce and is passionate about finding solutions that help sustain quality care across Iowa.

3. Identify the aspects that fall below the standard

109.7(2): Center directors and all staff have the required contact hours of training. Please have staff who need to, complete mandatory reporting training ASAP.

4. Any corrective action plans, provisional license, and safety plans-steps to get into compliance

5. Special Notes/Recommendations

Targeted Assessment: Behavior Management

I discussed with Director Darcy Sundell and her oversight of behavior management related to helping childcare staff: 1) Understand expectations, 2) managing frustrations, 3) monitor performance.

I spoke with Director Darcy Sundell about her approach to supporting staff in behavior management, including helping them understand expectations, manage frustrations, and monitor their own performance. Ms. Sundell explained that she strives to provide a comfortable and supportive work environment, and that her staff feel confident identifying when they need a break. They communicate openly with one another and with Darcy when they need support. She also monitors classrooms through her camera system to stay aware of activity and assist as needed. The center holds regular staff meetings to address concerns, and Darcy makes unannounced classroom visits to stay connected with day-to-day interactions and provide guidance in real time.

A full license is recommended at this time.

At least one visit will be made to the center during the next year.

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6. ADDENDUMS:

- Addendum1: This center has increased their capacity by 57 children as they have built a new building on the same lot so the license number will remain the same. The new building will focus on 2–3-year-olds, 4-year-olds and school age.

This Addendum is approved by supervisor on 7/29/2026 3:23:01 PM

Date: 07/01/2026

HHS Licensing Consultant: Leann Steinhauer

Non-compliance with any of the mandated regulatory requirements listed above may lead to the cancellation or revocation of your Child Care License. Please take steps necessary to completely address each of the violations noted above.

Child Care Resource and Referral is an excellent resource for providers to access training options and support in your area. You can reach Child Care Resource and Referral at **https://iowaccrr.org**.