Iowa Department of Human Services
CHILD CARE CENTER EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATION FOR LICENSE

Name of Center: Creekside Forest School **Enrollment:** 28 **License ID No. (Reapplications)** 51312

Street: 5300 Otis Rd SE **City:** Cedar Rapids Iowa **Zip** 52403 **County:** Linn

Mailing Address: 5300 Otis Rd SE, Cedar Rapids, IA, 52403

Director's Name: Marcy Fratzke **Phone Number:** 319-362-0664

On-Site Supervisor(s): Nicole Upchurch; Karlyn Senica **E-Mail:** education@indiancreeknaturecenter.org marcy@indiancreeknaturecenter.org

Date(s) of Visit: 05-07-2025

X **Licensing Visit** X **Unannounced Visit** **Off Year Visit** **Administrative Change**

LICENSING VISITS

New Application **Re-Application** X **NA**

Signed Application (470-0722) Received **Yes** **No** X **NA** **Date Signed:**

FIRE INSPECTION **State** X **Local** **NA** **Is Fire Inspection Approved?** X **Yes** **No** **NA**

Date Inspected: 12-19-2023

Comments :

LICENSE TYPE: X **Child Care** **Preschool (ages 3-5 meets three hours or less per day)**

Financial Type: Profit X Non-Profit NA

Accredition: Accredited NAEYC NSACA Other X NA

Program Serves: Infants (0-23 mo.) 2 Years X Preschool-Age School-Age

Get-Well Evening Care Special Needs

SCHEDULE: Year-round X School-Year Summer Only

HOURS:	*Year-round*	*School-Year*	*Summer Only*

LICENSE CAPACITY	Infants	2 Years	Preschool	School-Age	Capacity
General			28		28
Summer					0

QRS Rating: N/A

RECOMMENDATION FOR LICENSE:	
X	**FULL** license from 05-01-2025 to 05-01-2027
	PROVISIONAL license from
	DENIAL of initial application
	SUSPENSION of license
	REVOCATION of license

Licensing Consultant: Amy Lyons **Date:** 06-02-2025

I. IF CURRENT LICENSE IS PROVISIONAL, IDENTIFY THE CORRECTIVE ACTIONS

Not applicable.

II. IDENTIFY THE AREAS OBSERVED ON THE VISIT:

Creekside Forest School commenced operations on 5/25/2021. The program is located at the Indian Creek Nature Center. Creekside Forest School is a nature-based, independent preschool program offered to preschool-age children. This preschool operates school-year only, offering two half-day preschool sessions each day Tuesday through Friday. At the time of this visit, enrollment is 28.

Director of the program is Marcy Fratzke. Ms. Fratzke have over a decade of experience working in education and continues to participate in much child development related training. Ms. Fratzke has a degree in French spending the first part of her career teaching and traveling with high school aged students. In 2020, Ms. Fratzke made the transition to working with preschool aged children. On-site supervisors are Nicole Upchurch and Karlyn Senica. Ms. Upchurch is a graduate of the Iowa Master Naturalist program. Ms. Upchurch has experience instructing K-6 Spanish, Songwriting/Ukulele and Outdoor Education. Ms. Upchurch has several years experience working with children and continues to participate in much child development related training. Ms. Senica is a graduate from DePaul University with a degree in Biology. Ms. Senica has several years experience working with children in unique environments and continues to participate in much child development related training.

On 5/7/2025, program space was observed.

III. IDENTIFY THE OBSERVED STRENGTHS OF THE CENTER:

Creekside Forest School is a nature-based preschool program located at the Indian Creek Nature Center in Linn County. The program's mission is to create "...Champions of Nature in an outdoor learning environment that educates the whole child through play-based learning..." In September 2025, Creekside Forest School will be celebrating the start of their 5th year of operations providing a nature based preschool experience to families throughout the community. Congratulations!

Creekside Forest School's mission is "...to create Champions of Nature in an outdoor learning environment that educates the whole child through play-based learning..."

Creekside Forest School has the following website for persons to learn more about their program: https://indiancreeknaturecenter.org/creekside-forest-school/. The program also sponsors a blog https://indiancreeknaturecenter.org/about-us/our-blog/. Creekside Forest School has been featured on the Corridor Business Journal, a local news channel, a local newspaper and local radio station.

Creekside Forest School participates in quality initiatives including past QRS. Creekside Forest School is a member of the Natural Start Alliance, American Forest Kindergarten Association, and Iowa AEYC. Future goals being explored are related to a Nature Based Environmental Rating Scale (NABERS) and possible accreditation.

This year 2025 marks the Indian Creek Nature Center's 52nd year of creating Champions of Nature! Creekside Forest School is a non-profit program which operates under a Board of Directors. Creekside Forest School has access to a variety

of Indian Creek Nature Center staff including executive director, director of land stewardship, trail manager, farm manager, naturalists, volunteer coordinator, office administrators, guest services associates, land team and custodial staff. Creekside Forest School collaborates well with these persons in efforts to help ensure the preschool is sanitary and hazard free each day.

Ownership and management of Creekside Forest School remain consistent and are professional - experienced and educated. Ms. Fratzke had previously been teaching at Creekside Forest School before transitioning into the director role in 2024. The management team (including Ms. Fratzke, Ms. Upchurch, Ms. Senica) has systems of organization in place to help ensure administrative items are completed and maintained as required. The management team is also knowledgeable of licensing regulations as well as their center's own policies and procedures. Ms. Fratzke acknowledged being "...so proud of this place...having nature everywhere..." Ms. Fratze talked about future goals of adding hammocks, increased outdoor covered areas and continued renovation throughout the nature center.

Since commencing operations, the program continues to retain many seasoned employees. Evidence supports staff participate in annual training that exceeds licensing requirements. Ms. Fratzke discussed having an incredibly knowledgeable team who bring many skills, ideas and experiences to each preschool session. Ms. Fratzke talked about the program's full enrollment and incredible family volunteers. Ms. Fratzke acknowledged having a 200 family waitlist that is through 2028-2029 preschool-year.

Building and grounds are well-maintained. Amazing Space is Indian Creek Nature Center’s building and campus that opened in September of 2016 and will be celebrating a 9 year anniversary. Amazing Space is where the Creekside Forest School indoor classroom is located. Amazing Space is not only beautiful, it’s one of the most environmentally sustainable buildings in the country. In 2019, Amazing Space achieved Living Building Challenge Petal Certification – a rigorous certification that is years beyond LEED in providing a measure of true sustainability. The Creekside Forest School outdoor classroom includes Hazelnut Hideaway a certified in 2017 and recertified in 2020 Nature Explore Classroom. Each element of Hazelnut Hideaway was designed to fit the overall space and reflect a component of nature including the stump spiral and live edge balance beam in Adventurescape, the huts made of living willow, the performance stage made of tree cookies, and materials for block and structure building. Hazelnut Hideaway is an evolving project that embraces the seasons and program's mission.

Creekside Forest School has a daily schedule that varies with the rhythms of the season, student interest, and weather conditions. The program encourages children to connect with their natural environment through activities and explorations that are centered on what is happening seasonally. Children spend each preschool session outdoors unless there is inclement weather. Ms. Fratzke reported that during the 2024-2025 preschool-year, the program was able to operate outside for each entire session until mid-November 2024. The program has adopted the Emergent Curriculum and the Flow Learning Sequence as their approach to teaching and learning. Children have unique opportunities including catching a bullfrog, bird watching (e.g. nest creation, eggs hatching, first flights), tree climbing, building forts, and catching a tadpole to observe the life cycle in action from a classroom aquarium over several weeks before releasing the critter back into the wetland. Creekside Forest School is able to offer additional experiences based upon their location within the Indian Creek Nature Center. For instance, the preschool has access to nature trails, plant identification lessons, creek-stomping experiences, special events (e.g. monarch butterflies, migrating oriole bird feeder watching), on-site critters, and fresh foods from the Etzel Sugar Grove Farm (the nature center's farm). Additional preschool experiences have included foraging and cooking dandelion pie, foraging and preparing teas (e.g. mountain mint tea, violet tea, chamomile tea), foraging and creating lavender sachets, live Eagle Nest watching, foraging for and creating dandelion playdough, stone skipping, clay project, sing along, and hunting and rock sorting on sand. Ms. Fratzke also talked about how a "trading card" animal experience and shadow play project (with collaboration of cardboard maker space project) was added into the 2025 curriculum.

The program supports a healthy lifestyle including encouraging composting of food items when needed as well as paper products on-site. Items used on-site are eco-friendly. Preschool classroom furnishings include tree trunk stools made from trees lost to the 8/10/20 Derecho Storm.

Creekside Forest School continues efforts at optimal communication between the program/staff and families. The program has organized parent-staff/program information centers, offers regular program newsletters, utilizes technological communication resources, and supports family programming activities. Family events include open houses, family nights (e.g. flashlight hike, picnic supper, hike with s'mores), parent/program conferences, preschool pen pal experiences, bird caller visits, and encouragement of family visitors.

Creekside Forest School has emergency plans, policies, and procedures in place which are annually reviewed and updated as needed. Their emergency preparedness policies and procedures do include extensive plans for inclement weather on trails as well as trail emergency plan.

Creekside Forest School collaborates well with many community partners including CCR&R, health professionals, local school districts, the retirement community, local colleges (e.g. interns) and local businesses. Ms. Fratzke discussed having students from a local high school shadow the preschool program. The program receives support from many volunteers and

outreach efforts. The program has over 400 volunteers who offer their unique skills and assistance to help the Indian Creek Nature Center and Creekside Forest School succeed. Over the years, donations helped the preschool obtain a mud kitchen, child-size picnic tables, storage cabinets, a sand and water table, tarps, balls, ropes, gross motor play tools, a big parachute, measuring tapes, wool socks, backpack coolers, a sled, sunscreen, bug spray, rugs, pillows, snack tools, a puppet theater, art easels and more. The program continues to apply for and receive grants including a grant to obtain Patagonia outdoor protective gear (e.g. snow gear, rain gear, sun hats, water bottles with slings) for each child while at the preschool to help decrease barriers that may impact a child's ability to learn outdoors in all seasons. Since the last review, the program acquired an electric bus (December 2024) as well as 2 adult and 1 child all-terrain wheelchairs to help improve everyone's access to the program. This is the fist program in Cedar Rapids to offer all-terrain wheelchairs for outdoor recreation.

Staff engage each child in a daily health check upon arrival for early detection of apparent illness, communicable disease, or unusual condition or behavior which may adversely affect the child or the group. Staff discussed the program's cleaning, disinfecting, and sanitizing policies and procedures.

On the day of the monitoring visit, staff were nurturing and attentive to the children's needs. Staff were observed warmly greeting families and children upon arrival. Activities observed included outdoor grounds and trail exploration. Group gathering outdoors included everyone greeting one another (e.g. English, Spanish), some mild calisthenics incorporating music with movement and a book reading of the poem "In the Depths of the Summer Pond". Staff provided a companionable presence allowing children to have many choices in their play experiences. Routine transitions (e.g. clean up activities) worked smoothly into the program's welcoming and cooperative play environment. Throughout the program area, staff were overheard providing children with many words of encouragement and engaging children in much meaningful discussion. Children were overheard verbally expressing joy with the day's events and responded well to staff.

IV. IDENTIFY THE ASPECTS OF OPERATION THAT FALL BELOW THE STANDARDS REVIEWED:

None noted.

V. SPECIAL NOTES/RECOMMENDATIONS:

A full license is issued. Thank you for the visit.

*Note: If you are the Child Care Center Director and you feel something is unclear or unjustly cited, please contact your DHS Licensing Consultant to discuss the issue. The child care director may also send a response which will be placed in the licensing file.

*Note: If you are a member of the general public, there may be additional information contained in the public file. You may contact the DHS Licensing Consultant to inquire.