

Part 1 - Manual

INTRODUCTION

LABYRINTHS

Labyrinths have been in cultures around the world for thousands of years. We do not always know how they were used in the past, but today the labyrinth is a tool for connecting to our inner selves. Walking the labyrinth can clear the mind, calm people in crisis and give solace to people who are suffering. The labyrinth, with its twists and turns on the way to the center, is a metaphor for life. By walking it thoughtfully we can gain a better understanding of our life choices and our relationships with others. We can become aware of the things we would like to change and rejoice in the things that have brought us happiness. (See “Resources”, page 18, for more information on history.)

LABYRINTHS IN SCHOOLS

The use of labyrinths in schools is a relatively new development. A few years ago it was just an idea that some of us had. Today we know of school labyrinths in at least 18 states as well as in Germany, Scotland and South Africa. I'm sure there are many more.

Perhaps the popularity of labyrinths in schools today is a result of the frantic pace of our society. Children feel pressured - to succeed academically, to excel at sports, to be popular, to participate in a multitude of after-school activities and to please their parents and teachers. A tool that allows them to *slow* down and *calm* down is welcomed - by the children themselves, as well as by their teachers.

BENEFITS OF LABYRINTHS FOR CHILDREN

The reaction to walking the labyrinth is different for each child. Children have reported that after walking the labyrinth they calm down, become more relaxed and less angry or frustrated, gain insight for solving problems, feel closer to a friend with whom they walked the labyrinth and are more aware of the things for which they are grateful. Children who have experienced a loss



find that walking the labyrinth helps in the grieving process. An eight year old boy whose dog had died two weeks before we built the labyrinth at his school said “I’ve had a very hard time since my dog died, but after I walked the labyrinth I realized that my dog will live in my heart forever.” Other children have reported that they were very upset about parents divorcing, or parents fighting. When they walked the labyrinth, they felt calmer and better able to concentrate. Teachers and counselors have used the labyrinth as a tool in the conflict resolution process. (See “Part 2 –Lesson Plans and Classroom Ideas”.)

Walking the labyrinth allows for creativity and intuition to flower. Studies have shown that people are better able to connect with the right side of the brain after walking the labyrinth, which helps them think more clearly and creatively. It has been reported that children do better if they walk the labyrinth before taking an exam. Each child has a different experience each time he or she walks the labyrinth. Walking is not always momentous like the examples above, but it always seems to have a positive effect. Sometimes walking the labyrinth is just an enjoyable experience.

Integrating the labyrinth with curriculum can enhance the experience for children. For example, history can come alive through the study of labyrinths through the centuries. Math can be meaningful in figuring out how many stones of a certain size will be needed to build a labyrinth of a given diameter. Children love art projects related to the labyrinth. (See “Part 2 – Lesson Plans and Classroom Ideas” for specific curriculum suggestions.)

SUGGESTED STEPS FOR CREATING A SCHOOL LABYRINTH PROGRAM

Keep in mind that each school is different. The following are suggestions based on the experience of the Labyrinth Resource Group in ten Santa Fe elementary schools. Your labyrinth building process will depend on the needs of the school and the people involved. Also keep in mind that my background as a School Psychologist has influenced my approach to the labyrinth experience for children. In “Part 2 – Lesson Plans and Classroom Ideas” you will find many other wonderful ways to use the labyrinth with children.

Step 1: *Gather with Kindred Spirits:*

(If you are already a school staff person, you can skip this step.)

It helps to have a group of labyrinth enthusiasts to figure out the best way to approach a school with the idea of building a labyrinth. You cannot just walk into a school and announce you have this wonderful tool to give them. Here in Santa Fe, we have not found it necessary to do this step. Once we put a labyrinth in the first school (through a personal connection), people from other schools came to us requesting labyrinths in their schools.

Topics that can be discussed with this group include:

- Have labyrinths been constructed in any nearby schools? If so, contact the people involved. They might have contacts at other schools and be able to help you make a connection.
- Does anyone in the group have friends who are teachers, counselors or principals in a local school where they would be willing to work with you to bring the labyrinth experience to their school? If possible, have 3 or 4 schools to consider.
- What relevant resources are available in the planning group? For example: skills, work experience or contacts with friends, neighbors or school personnel.

- Discuss how to approach a school - you must know your audience and “speak their language”. Emphasize how this will benefit the children. Do not use religious or “New Age-y” language in public schools. Avoid trigger words that might offend people.
- Choose a spokesperson for the group who is sensitive to school needs and can relate well to school personnel.

- Discuss funding possibilities. Some schools have been able to secure funding for a labyrinth project. Perhaps you will have a grant writer in your group! Other schools have had stones donated and parents or school maintenance personnel or staff have helped with the preparation of the site. At some schools the children have brought in all the stones and no other funding was needed. All of us who have worked on the Santa Fe school labyrinths have been volunteers.

Step 2: *Contact Your School Staff Liaison*

Teachers who are open to new ideas and who enjoy doing something unusual and innovative are most likely to succeed with a project like this. Unless there are committed people willing to do preparation in the school and follow-up after the labyrinth is built, the project should not be undertaken. An ideal situation is to have an interested teacher working with someone who is not tied up in a classroom (e.g. guidance counselor, nurse, administrator). Keep in mind that it is always better to have the school personnel take responsibility for as much of the planning and organizing of the project as possible. They know their school better than an outsider and the more they are involved in creating the labyrinth, the more likely they will be to maintain it in the future.

Step 3: *Build Momentum*

The first step is to meet with the people who will take responsibility for the labyrinth to explore having a labyrinth in the school. It is helpful to have the principal present. If there are staff present who are not familiar with the labyrinth, again emphasize the benefits to the children. Have information available as to what the process will be, what help you can provide and what responsibilities the school will have. This would be a good time to show the “Kids on the Path” DVD. You might also wish to show the quotes from children who have found the labyrinth experience meaningful and helpful. (See page 17.)

Once it is agreed to proceed, tentative dates should be set for each stage of the process:

- Introduce labyrinth to all school personnel, including maintenance staff, if possible.
- Plan location, type of labyrinth and materials to be used.
- Schedule classroom presentations on history and use of labyrinths.
- Consider classroom activities relating to the labyrinth, including how to involve families.
- Set a date to lay out the basic pattern. (We usually do the layout the day before construction.)
- Set a date for actually building the labyrinth. (Include a Rain Date.)
- Consider follow-up activities (e.g. inviting parents to walk, a Peace Walk, a “New Term” or “End of Term” Walk, a staff walk and more classroom activities).
- Plan NOW for how to maintain the labyrinth (especially during the summer) and keep the labyrinth experience alive in the future.

If the whole school is going to participate in the construction of the labyrinth consider having one or two classes plan the publicity for the “Labyrinth Building Day” (posters, announcements, invitations, Press Releases, etc.).

Step 4: *Plan the Labyrinth*

Ideally, the location should be easily accessible to all the children and in a place that is relatively quiet and protected from noisy activities. For safety reasons it is best if it is seen from the school, but not from the road. It should be a place where children can safely go to walk the labyrinth without constant adult supervision.

The location must be discussed with all the appropriate people in the school before starting the building process. Think through which people and/or groups might be considering use of the land, so you will not find the labyrinth destroyed because of an addition to the building or a new parking lot. Be sure anyone who will be affected by the building of the labyrinth is notified. School people “left out of the loop” could have hard feelings that result in problems later.

There must be someone knowledgeable about labyrinths to lay out the location and pattern - it would be a mistake to just copy a pattern out of a book and mark it on the ground. This labyrinth expert can help school representatives position the labyrinth and decide on the type of labyrinth, the diameter of the labyrinth, the diameter of the center, and the location of the entrance.

We in Santa Fe have always had a dowser help make these decisions. We've all heard of dowsing for water when digging a well. Dowsers use intuition to determine where the labyrinth should be. We emphasize that we are planning for the very best location for the labyrinth. Some say that dowsing the location and orientation makes for a more effective labyrinth. On the other hand, some people may strongly object to dowsing. For more information on dowsing, see Sig Lonegren's book ("Resources", page 18). If you dowse, it is essential to work with the school people to determine who should be present when you dowse. We have sometimes done the dowsing with just the people who are organizing the project in their school. On other occasions we have done it with many children and teachers joining in. (Kids love it and succeed at it much more easily than adults.)

Most of our labyrinths have been between 30 and 40 feet in diameter. Be sure to allow space in the center for quite a few children and a reasonable width for the paths. Remember that the stones or other line markers take up some space. The expert should work with school people so the needs of the school are taken into consideration. For example, in one school there was a child who used a wheelchair so the labyrinth was made with paths wide enough to accommodate her wheelchair.



We usually build seven-circuit patterns in the elementary schools. We find many children do not have the attention span to walk the eleven-circuit Chartres design (left).

We started by building seven- circuit concentric designs (right). When students from a Santa Fe school did a field trip to several labyrinths



before building their own, they decided they liked the one with “more turns”, so we now do a modified Chartres pattern (left). We usually do the basic pattern without the “rosette” in the center and the



“lunations” around the perimeter. In any case, plan for a large center area so several children can be there at the same time.

The most basic, and easiest, way to build a labyrinth (at least in Santa Fe’s dry climate) is to place stones on the earth to form the pattern. The school may want to have a base of gravel, coarse sand or bark on which to place the stones. The benefit of children bringing the rocks to be used is that they really feel a part of the construction. If the whole school brings in rocks, perhaps each class could have a way of identifying “their” rocks, such as having a different colored sticker on the rocks for each class. Usually each class brings the stones which they have gathered and places them in the labyrinth on the day of building. The stones should be about the size of a grapefruit - small stones make the task tedious and can be easily displaced. If it seems unlikely that the children can provide enough rocks, additional stones can be purchased.

Other possibilities are: paint on pavement, playing-field liner on grass or earth, bricks or tiles buried in grass, bottles buried in the ground, short stubs of branches set on end in the ground or temporary labyrinths of almost any materials. Use your imagination! (See also “Part 3 – Construction Workbook”.)

If there is funding available, there are professionals who can create a labyrinth of concrete, pavers or other materials (see Robert Ferré’s web site: www.labyrinth-enterprises.com, John Ridder’s web site: www.labyrinths.org or Marty Kermeen’s web site: www.artpaver.com).



In one school, the children and their families were encouraged to paint stones to put in the labyrinth. They brought stones representing family members and ideas - such as “Peace”, “Respect”, “Have pride”, “Be happy”, etc. Be sure to research the most durable paint for your

climate. It was wonderful to see families bring their painted stones to the school on the day the labyrinth was built. If you have very large stones, use them in the outside ring of the labyrinth. Not all schools have welcomed the idea of painting stones. A teacher at another school said that when they had painted stones one child did not like it and commented, “Don’t put words in my mouth.” At still another school a teacher felt it was spoiling the natural stones to paint on them. Decide what works best in your school.

Step 5: *Present to Staff*

It is important to hold a meeting with all teachers and staff, giving them some background and information about the history and use of labyrinths. Emphasize the benefits to children. In addition to the more serious benefits mentioned above, it can also be just a lot of fun for children! As many of us have observed, their first reaction is to see how fast they can run to the center. There have been many games developed for use on the labyrinth (see “Let’s Have a Labyrinth Party” by Lani Rosetta in “Resources”, page 18).

Included in this initial staff meeting can be a preview of the class presentation (discussed in detail below).

Since very often the maintenance staff is involved in preparing the surface for the labyrinth and in maintaining it in the future, they should be included in this first meeting. This way, they are a part of the process and can be of enormous help later.