Introduction to Using the Labyrinth with Children

The labyrinth can provide a unique alternative to traditional playground and after school activities.

The Labyrinth – A Universal Spiral Circle Pattern
The labyrinth, a spiral circle pattern that can be traced back more than 4,000 years, is both an ancient and a modern tool and safe space that, through its long history of sacred and secular use, has crossed cultural and spiritual traditions around the world.

There are two basic families of labyrinth designs: the oldest and simplest is the Classical Family which is drawn from a seed pattern; the Medieval Family is a more complicated design based on sacred geometry and many layers of symbolic meaning, with the most famous being the 11-circuit labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral in France. There are many modern adaptations of the Classical and Medieval styles.

Labyrinths today can be found in many contexts and environments, including healthcare facilities, religious worship spaces, retreat centres, community centres and parks, and schools of all kinds. They can be permanent or portable, indoors or outdoors, ground/floor or finger labyrinths.

Walking the labyrinth has been reclaimed in our time as a way to move into relaxation, reflection, and renewal. It can connect us to our creative energies and inner wisdom, to our deeper selves and one another.

Amazing but not a Maze
Labyrinths are not the same as mazes, with which some children may already be familiar. Mazes have dead ends, cul-de-sacs, intersections, high walls and other features that are meant to confuse and get the walker lost. A maze is a left-brain game.

Walking the labyrinth is a heart-led, right-brain, intuitive experience. The labyrinth helps you find your way, literally and metaphorically: it is a single path to the center and you change direction and walk back out the same path. The whole labyrinth is visible at one time.

The Gifts of the Labyrinth
The labyrinth has appeal for children from different cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds, including those who are disadvantaged or have high needs. Walking the labyrinth is an inclusive practice that is as easy as simply walking or moving in some way; as comforting and calming as the circle of a hug; as flowing as water with ideas and solutions that are creative and inspiring. It can help users to find balance in body, mind, emotions, and spirit. It appeals to all the senses. It is a place of laughter, tears, shouting, singing, chanting, and silence; a place of walking, dancing, hopping, skipping, even sometimes running.

Labyrinths in schools promote a calm, focused attention span and mentally, physically, and emotionally refresh children. Walking the labyrinth helps young people to reduce anger and frustration and to find answers to inner questions about themselves, their
families, and their friends. Walking a labyrinth engages a child’s natural curiosity and creativity. It can shift one’s mind from left-brain, linear thinking to right-brain creative, intuitive, non-verbal thinking. The labyrinth is a safe space for recognizing and sharing feelings. And a great place for having Fun!

Using the labyrinth is a way to develop and practice Healthy Life Skills: slowing down and quieting busy minds; letting go of worries and doubts; becoming grounded and centered; opening to the flow of intuition and creative energy that supports goal-setting, problem solving, decision-making, and artistic expression; moving forward, on the labyrinth and in everyday life, choosing wise action based on core values. It helps to deepen respect for one another; you walk the path together yet you each are on your own unique journey.

Creating and walking a labyrinth enhances and complements many school subjects and activities, including math; history and social studies; language; science and health; art and music; physical education and movement. It can strengthen bonds between children, with teachers and the larger school community.

The Labyrinth and Special Needs Children
The labyrinth is being used increasingly in working with children with ADHD, autism, and behavioral challenges. Walking the curving and turning labyrinth helps to balance the two hemispheres of the brain. The calm, focused attention required to walk it can stay with the children for some time. Other advantages include the facts that there is no failure, you can't do it wrong; it is more about the journey than the destination, being more than doing; and the whole labyrinth is visible as the children walk so there is no stress (This is a benefit for the adults, too!)

Children and the Labyrinth
Children seem to have an almost immediate and deep natural connection with the labyrinth. They will take on the challenge of almost any labyrinth but seem to be really drawn to the Classical or round modern, likely because of the simplicity of these patterns and the sweeping 360-degree turns.

The following are only a few suggestions for activities for children that can be done with and/or on labyrinths. The labyrinth can be a useful pattern and safe, creative space in which explore almost any theme. Your imagination will lead you from these to many related or different ways to offer the labyrinth to both young and older children.

The suggestions for activities have been drawn from my own experience as well as the many wonderful resources that have been developed by other labyrinth facilitators working with children in a variety of settings. Especially helpful have been Marge McCarthy’s Kids on the Path: School Labyrinth Guide, Part 1 -- Manual and Gael Hancock’s 108 Ways to Use Labyrinths in Schools.