

Creating in Your Own Space

A Cyanotype Curriculum for Autistic Teen Learners

Recommended Age: Teenagers and young adults

Group Size: 6–15 participants

Duration: 90–120 minutes

Setting: Rehabilitation, community, or learning center with access to a quiet workspace, sunlight, and water

About This Curriculum

This workshop uses cyanotype as a calm, structured art-making process that allows participants to work at their own pace and participate in different ways.

Participants begin by observing materials, choosing what interests them, arranging simple or repeated forms, and watching sunlight transform the final image. Verbal sharing is optional, and participants may observe before joining, work quietly, or spend different amounts of time on each step.

The workshop should use clear demonstrations, predictable steps, and flexible pacing.

Materials

- pre-treated cyanotype paper
- safe leaves, grasses, seeds, and other natural materials
- transparent acrylic sheets
- clips
- trays of clean water
- gloves
- paper towels
- trays or containers for organizing materials
- visual step cards
- optional pencils and drawing paper
- access to direct sunlight
- a quiet indoor workspace

Lesson Plan

Part 1 — Introduce the Process

5–10 minutes

Begin with a short visual demonstration rather than a long explanation.

Show:

1. the cyanotype paper
2. a few available materials
3. how to arrange them
4. how the paper is exposed
5. a finished cyanotype

Keep the sequence visible throughout the workshop so participants can return to it when needed.

Part 2 — Observe Before Joining

5–10 minutes

Give participants time to look at the materials and the demonstration before asking them to begin.

Some may start immediately, while others may prefer to observe first. Avoid repeatedly prompting someone who is not ready.

Let participants approach the activity when they feel comfortable.

Part 3 — Choose Materials

10–15 minutes

Offer a limited but varied selection of leaves, grasses, seeds, and simple found materials.

Participants can choose one material, several materials, or repeat the same shape many times.

Avoid requiring everyone to use the same number or type of objects.

Part 4 — Arrange the Artwork

15–25 minutes

Give each participant one sheet of cyanotype paper and allow them to arrange materials independently.

Some participants may create repeated patterns, while others may prefer simple compositions with only one or two objects.

Do not correct unusual arrangements unless there is a safety or process issue.

When the participant appears finished, ask before helping secure the materials under the clear sheet.

Part 5 — Expose to Sunlight

10–15 minutes

Bring the prepared prints into direct sunlight.

Participants may watch the paper change, remain nearby, or return to the indoor space depending on their comfort and attention.

Use a timer so the exposure period feels predictable.

Avoid making the waiting period unnecessarily long.

Part 6 — Reveal the Print

10–15 minutes

Rinse the exposed prints in clean water according to the cyanotype paper instructions.

Invite participants to watch the image appear, but do not require everyone to gather around the rinsing area at the same time.

Allow extra physical space around the water station when possible.

Return each print to its maker once it has been rinsed and placed somewhere safe to dry.

Part 7 — Respond in Their Own Way

10–15 minutes

Place finished works where participants can view them, but keep reflection flexible.

Instead of requiring a group presentation, offer several ways to respond:

- point to a favorite part
- show the work to a teacher
- choose whether to display it
- compare two prints
- answer a simple question
- simply observe the finished work

Possible questions include:

- What part do you like?
- Which shape do you notice first?
- Would you make another one?
- Is there anything you would change?

Sharing should always be optional.

Facilitator Notes

Make the sequence predictable.

Use visual demonstrations and keep the order of the activity clear. Knowing what comes next can make the workshop easier to follow.

Allow observation to count as participation.

Some participants may need time to watch before joining. Avoid treating quiet observation as refusal or lack of interest.

Keep verbal instructions short.

Demonstrate one step at a time instead of explaining the entire activity at once.

Respect individual pacing.

Do not require everyone to move through the activity at exactly the same speed.

Avoid forcing eye contact or verbal sharing.

Participants can communicate preferences through pointing, choosing, arranging, gestures, or their artwork.

Leave room for repetition.

Repeated shapes, patterns, or materials do not need to be redirected. They can become meaningful parts of the composition.

Notice subtle engagement.

Interest may appear through careful looking, returning to a print, repeated arranging, or quietly showing work to a familiar teacher rather than obvious excitement.

Optional Extension — From Artwork to Practical Skill

For older participants, the workshop can be repeated over multiple sessions so they become more familiar with the process.

Because cyanotype follows a clear and repeatable sequence, participants can gradually practice specific parts of production, such as selecting materials, arranging compositions, preparing papers, or organizing finished prints.

If appropriate for the learning center, finished cyanotypes could later be explored as cards, small artworks, bookmarks, or other simple products. This should only be considered with the participant's interests, abilities, and the center's guidance in mind.

Safety Notes

- Use pre-treated cyanotype paper.
- Only use plants and objects that are known to be safe.
- Keep walkways and workspaces uncluttered.
- Supervise outdoor exposure and rinsing.
- Use gloves during rinsing when appropriate.
- Avoid overcrowding around water trays.
- Provide a quieter area if the main workspace becomes too busy.
- Wash hands after handling natural materials.