

FAMILY BUSINESS IN SEVEN STEPS



WHY FAMILY BUSINESS?

FAMILY BUSINESS HELPS YOU UNDERSTAND YOUR STUDENTS

As a teacher, you bring your whole self to the classroom. And like everyone else, your understanding of your world — the classroom, the school, the nation — is rooted in your racial and ethnic identity, your gender identity, your physical abilities, your age, your personal experiences, and so on. Each of your students also brings their understanding of the world to the classroom every day.

Gaps between the way students and their teacher experience the world — and by extension, the classroom — create significant obstacles to learning. Family Business is a daily classroom practice that helps teachers bridge these gaps. Through Family Business, teachers build rapport with their students and sharpen their ability to view the world through their students' eyes. These insights are invaluable because teachers can use them to inform their classroom practice. They are especially helpful for teachers whose life experiences are different from those of their students. The more teachers see and understand the most authentic version(s) of their students — and teach in ways that reflect that understanding — the better those teachers can support their students and help them thrive academically and personally.

FAMILY BUSINESS HELPS STUDENTS LEARN

Family Business is an investment in your students. It gives students opportunities to develop social-emotional skills that open the door to more productive learning and help the class function as a cohesive whole. Perhaps most important, students with strong social-emotional skills are more likely to take the risks that are essential for learning. These skills also increase the likelihood that students will stick with challenging work, seek help when they need it, and be successful in academics and life.



Quality student-teacher interactions help produce positive academic and social outcomes for students of color.



HOW DO I INCORPORATE FAMILY BUSINESS INTO MY CLASS?

Family Business is a daily classroom discussion that gives students a forum to tell their own stories, from their own perspective, without judgment or fear of retribution. Family Business is conducted at the beginning of each class, and during that time, it transforms the traditional academic environment into a family room — a space where students feel seen, understood, cared for, and heard.

FOLLOW THESE STEPS ... AND HELP YOUR STUDENTS THRIVE



1. DEFINE “FAMILY” TOGETHER. Invite your students to define “family.” Explain that families do not always see things the same way, but their bonds of respect and support are more powerful than those differences. Make sure students understand that the class will set aside time for Family Business every day. Explain that this time will be a non-negotiable feature of every class meeting, but participation always will be completely voluntary. The only exceptions will be for emergencies or major school events, such as state, district, or school benchmark exams.

2. DISCUSS AND AGREE TO NORMS. Guide discussion about agreements the class will follow to maintain healthy, respectful interactions. These are expectations that create a safe space, such as, “No one talks while others are talking.” Ask students to discuss how violations of these agreements would erode support and how that would look and feel. Some teachers tell students to view their classmates as their siblings. As you and your students establish norms, send the message that each student’s authentic self — who they are as an individual — is a welcomed, valuable addition to the classroom family. Make sure everyone agrees to all of the classroom norms.

3. HAVE FOUR NON-NEGOTIABLE NORMS. As you discuss norms, introduce these four and include them in the final list of norms everyone agrees to uphold: (1) Every student listens attentively. (2) Students do not use the names of anyone who is not part of the classroom family. They must use pseudonyms in stories that involve anyone outside the classroom family. (3) What is said during Family Business is not repeated outside the classroom. (4) Everyone who wants to talk during Family Business gets to talk.

4. BEGIN EACH CLASS WITH FAMILY BUSINESS. If possible, create a welcoming physical space for Family Business. For example, group desks into a circle rather than rows. At the beginning of each class ask, “Who has Family Business?” and open the floor to students to discuss what is on their minds. On some days, there will be a lot of Family Business. On others, it will be very brief. Many teachers find that Family Business typically takes about 10 minutes per class. Remember that Family Business is an investment in understanding students, helping them develop autonomy, and helping them build trusting relationships with you and with one another. Ultimately, it will save time in terms of classroom management, and most important, it can help students succeed.

5. MODEL TRANSPARENCY, AND GIVE IT TIME. Over time, students will begin to talk about their own lives if they believe your classroom is a safe space to do so. But students are unlikely to open up just because their teacher asks them to. And a classroom does not feel safe just because a teacher announces that it is. Model transparency by sharing information about your life. Talk about something you did over the weekend, something you saw in the neighborhood that inspired you or made you giggle, or a new food you tried. Some teachers play music at the beginning of Family Business to get students’ attention, show their own musical taste, and provide a starting point for discussion.

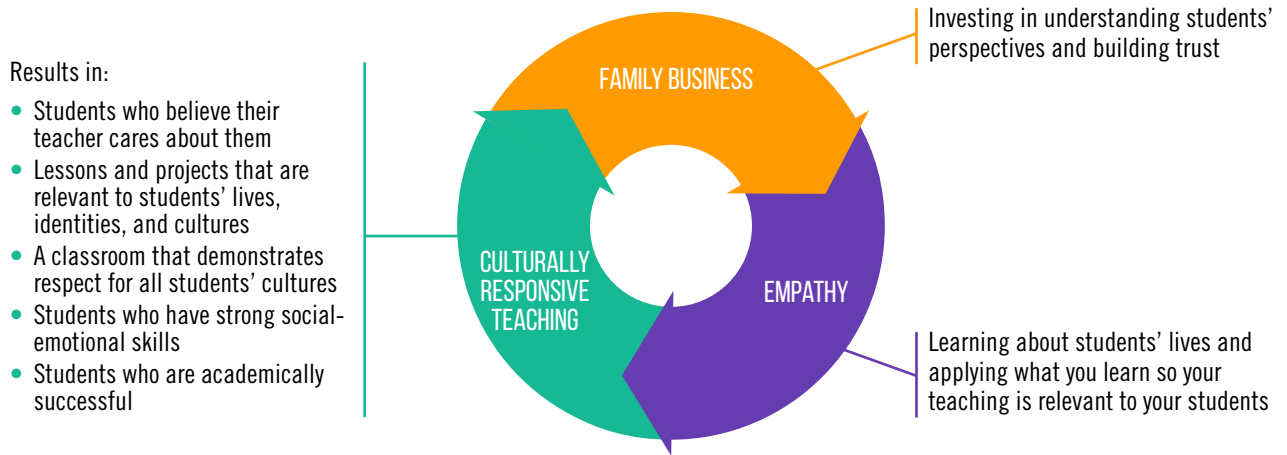
6. ASK QUESTIONS. Sometimes it helps to start Family Business with a prompt that breaks the ice. Such prompts should be as broad as possible so students can use them as an entry point to discuss what is most important to them. If the initial question — “Who has Family Business?” — does not lead to discussion, ask how people spent the weekend or to share something that made them smile recently.

7. HELP STUDENTS PROCESS PERSONAL ISSUES AND CURRENT EVENTS. Family Business thrives when students begin to trust their teacher and their classmates. At that point, students begin using Family Business to discuss significant issues, including loss of loved ones, problems at home, and school issues. Family Business also is a ready-made forum for helping students process unsettling national events, such as police violence and the events of January 6, 2021. Be present and allow students to talk. Honor the risks students take when they share something personal or engage in discussions that make them vulnerable.

PUTTING FAMILY BUSINESS IN CONTEXT

Effective teachers — particularly those whose life experiences differ from those of their students — actively consider their students’ cultures in their teaching. This practice, called *culturally responsive teaching*, can be evident in how teachers design lesson plans and projects, manage their classrooms, interact with students who are struggling, and so on.

Empathy — essentially the ability to view a situation from another person’s perspective — is a key ingredient in culturally responsive teaching. It involves learning about students’ lives on their terms, in their words, and then applying that knowledge to all elements of teaching. Family Business can be a critical tool for better understanding your students and earning their trust. Then you can apply what you learn so your teaching will be more relevant to your students.



WHAT’S NEXT?

Classroom teachers who allow students to act, think, speak, and perform their various social identities without judgment create the atmosphere for high-quality student-teacher interactions.

Family Business is one example of using empathy to teach more effectively. Here are additional ideas that you can start using today.

TO BETTER UNDERSTAND YOUR STUDENTS, YOU ALSO CAN:

- Ask students to keep a class journal and write in it every day. Read each student’s entries once a week, and write back to them in their journals. Encourage students to express themselves freely and give you feedback through their journals.
- A few times a year, have students write a letter to you as a writing assignment. Invite them to discuss their learning experience over time and to give you feedback. Or, at the end of the semester, ask students to reflect on the term. Ask them what you should change and what you should keep the same.
- Set up a question box and invite students to use it for questions about lessons, assignments, or anything else on their minds. Tell them they can include their name or ask a question anonymously.

AS YOU GATHER INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR STUDENTS, APPLY IT TO YOUR TEACHING. FOR EXAMPLE:

- Listen to what your students tell you, and apply what you learn from them to your teaching. Remember that their experiences and perspectives may be different from what you remember about being a student. Ground your teaching in what they need.
- As you develop lesson plans and projects, ask yourself if you are teaching in a way that is relevant to your students. Do the authors and experts you highlight look like the students in your class? Are you using examples that are relevant to your students?
- If you have a question box, establish a regular time (for example, every Friday, every other Friday, or once a month) to answer students’ questions.

RESOURCES ABOUT EMPATHY AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

- [Who Has Family Business?](#)
- [Empathy, Teacher Dispositions, and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy](#)
- [Applying Empathy in Culturally Diverse Classrooms](#)
- [Developing Empathy](#)