



FAMILY BUSINESS

“Great teachers focus not on compliance, but on connections and relationships.”

-P.J. Caposey

OVERVIEW

Students and their teacher create a safe space in which students tell their stories and listen to their classmates’ stories without judgment or fear of retribution.

LEVELS

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To build strong relationships with students
- To establish a classroom environment in which students feel seen, understood, cared for, and heard

TIME REQUIRED

- 10 minutes/day

MATERIALS

- N/A

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Teachers will:

- Cultivate positive relationships with students by providing a space for students to safely share their experiences
- Apply what they learn about their students to make their teaching more relevant to them

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Think about a time when you were vulnerable with someone who made you feel comfortable. What sort of behavior made you feel comfortable? How did the experience shape your relationship with that person?
- Why is it important to learn about your students' lives?

INSTRUCTIONS

Why “Family Business?”

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 conducted at the beginning of each class that helps teachers bridge these gaps. During this time, Family Business transforms the traditional academic environment into a family room—a space where students feel seen, understood, cared for, and heard. Here is more information about [Family Business](#).

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 will always 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 is also 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.

SOURCE

[Chezare A. Warren, Ph.D.](#), Peabody College, Vanderbilt University
[Susan Lessner, M.Ed.](#), Thornton Fractional School District

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did students respond? Are there changes you can make to help students feel more comfortable?
- What sort of support might you offer to students facing fairly difficult situations?
- Have you noticed a change in students' behavior?
- Based on what you've heard from your students, are there ways in which you could alter your teaching practices to make sure you are teaching in a way that is relevant to your students?
- Did you uncover any unconscious biases you might hold about your students? If so, how might you begin to transform them?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

[Research](#) finds that empathy is key to facilitating teachers' capacity to act and respond to students in ways that are evident of culturally responsive pedagogy. Furthermore, a [study](#) with white female high school teachers and their Black students suggests that empathy is developed by listening to students' perspectives and experiences.

In addition, [extensive research](#) clearly shows that positive teacher-student relationships are extremely important for student outcomes in various categories—feelings, attitudes, behavior, and achievement—and at all ages. Studies with diverse groups of students have found that [students describe good teachers](#) as those who listen and take a personal interest in students' lives—core aspects of Family Business.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

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. Through [Family Business](#), teachers build rapport with their students and sharpen their ability to view the world through their students' eyes. 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 is an investment in 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.

TERMS OF USE

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