Box 32.1

ENVIRONMENT IMPACTING A STUDENT’S BEHAVIOR: JACOB

Jacob, a seventh grader, was spending about as much time in the principal’s office for in-school suspension as he was in some of his classes. In the teacher’s lounge, the English teacher insisted that Jacob was just looking for attention. “He’s loud and obnoxious and if his parents would give him a little attention at home he wouldn’t be like this.” The science teacher, wasn’t so sure. “You know, he always seems pretty quiet in my room; in fact, I don’t even notice him much.” The nurse left the lounge puzzled. Three teachers had constant trouble with Jacob and three did not. She was not so sure it was attention seeking. Why would it just be happening for the same three teachers?

According to the ABC model, she knew there were antecedent stimuli that triggered behaviors and the consequences that maintained the behavior, or reinforced the child doing the behavior because they liked the consequence that occurred. The consequence was being sent to the office each day. He was not getting any attention there. In fact, he had to sit in a cubicle by himself, and could not eat lunch with his friends. Therefore, the school nurse suspected that there might be something from which Jacob wanted to escape.

The nurse decided to talk with several of the teachers privately. No one seemed to really know why Jacob acted out. There did not seem to be any provoking incidents; he just started behaving rudely, talking back to the teacher, and occasionally even shoving another student. The nurse then decided to talk with Jacob. They covered many different topics until one finally seemed to hit a nerve. When discussing several new students who had recently entered the school, Jacob became upset. The nurse recommended that the counselor, Mr. C., explore this issue further with Jacob.

A week later, Mr. C. let the nurse know that he talked with Jacob and, indeed, there had been some problems with one of the new students. Jacob had been the victim of bullying and had been dealing with it by getting into trouble and escaping from the classes that had the other student in them. The nurse recognized that the antecedent stimuli in this case were the classes with the child who bullied Jacob, and the consequence was being removed from the class, an escape-motivated behavior. Mr. C. was able to intervene, and expected that Jacob would be spending a little less time in the principal’s office.