Course Introduction

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Welcome to Indian Hills’ online course for mandatory reporters of dependent adult and child abuse. If you are taking this course, most likely you interact with dependent adults and children as some aspect of your job or profession, requiring you to be a mandatory reporter of abuse and requiring this training. In this course, we will discuss the laws governing abuse reporting, who is a victim, what a mandatory reporter is, the legal categories of abuse, physical and emotional indicators of abuse, how to report, and information about your legal requirement to report. Let’s begin by discussing the history of child abuse and why child abuse laws came about.

Child abuse is not a new phenomenon. The abuse and neglect of children has been documented for more than two thousand years. However, attempts to prevent child abuse are relatively new. The first documented legal response to child abuse in the United States occurred in 1874. Mary Ellen McCormack lived in the Hell’s Kitchen section of Manhattan. “Mamma has been in the habit of whipping and beating me almost every day,” the little girl testified. “She used to whip me with a twisted whip — a rawhide.” It was Mary Ellen who finally put a human face on child abuse — and prompted a reformers’ crusade to prevent it and to protect its victims, an effort that continues to this day. It was the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals who pleaded in court to have this eight-year-old child removed from her abusive and neglectful environment. In 1874, there were no laws protecting children from physical abuse from their parents. It was an era of “spare the rod and spoil the child,” and parents routinely handed out painful and damaging punishment without comment or penalty. Since there were no child abuse laws at the time, the Society argued that the child was, in fact, an animal, and should be provided the same protection as other animals. Ms. Connolly, Mary Ellen’s adoptive step mother was found guilty. Mary Ellen never returned to her adoptive home.

Following this, in the last few decades of the 1800s, societies to protect children from cruelty were formed in many states. The next movement to protect children came as the result of several pediatricians publishing articles about children suffering multiple fractures and brain injuries at the hands of their caretakers. In 1961, Dr. C. Henry Kempe, then president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, held a conference on the “battered child syndrome,” in which he outlined a “duty” to the child to prevent “repetition of trauma.” The Battered Child Syndrome Conference resulted in many states passing laws to protect children from physical abuse.

Child abuse is now recognized as a problem of epidemic proportions. Child abuse has serious consequences that may remain with indelible pain and consequences throughout the victim’s lifetime. The violence and negligence of parents and caretakers serve as a model for children as they grow up. The child victims of today, without protection and treatment, may become the child abusers of tomorrow.

As with any social issue, child abuse is a problem for the entire community. Achieving the goals of protective services requires the coordination of many resources. Each professional group and agency
involved with a family assumes responsibility for specific elements of the child protective service process.

“Dependent adults” are people who are aged 18 or over who are incapable of adequate self-care due to physical or mental conditions and require assistance from other people. Dependent adults may be elderly, or may have diminished physical or mental capacities that prevent them from meeting their own needs adequately. We will discuss what a mandatory reporter is, and about your legal requirement to report in more detail later.

Elder abuse is one of the most under-recognized and under-reported social problems in the United States. It is far less likely to be reported than child abuse because of the lack of public awareness. Although dependent adult abuse is not exclusively elder abuse, this is a large portion of it. Iowa has an increasing proportion of people who are aged 60 or over, and the number of persons 80 or over is increasing more rapidly than any other age group. Iowa’s proportion of older adults in the population exceeds that of the United States as a whole. Nationwide, Iowa ranks 2nd in the percentage of persons over age 75 and 85, 3rd in the percentage of persons over age 65, and 4th in the percentage of persons over age 60.

It is the adult’s “dependent” state which makes them rely on others for care and assistance, but which also may make them unable to ward off abuse from a caretaker. Abuse may occur in the adult’s home, a family member’s home, or in a facility such as a nursing home. Once again, dependent adult abuse is one of the most under-recognized and under-reported social problems in the United States. It is far less likely to be reported than any other type of abuse, including child abuse, and because of this, you must be ever diligent when interacting with these adults through your job or profession to be on the lookout for signs of abuse.

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