**CASE STUDY**

**My son was sexually abused after being groomed on his game console**

A MOTHER is sending a heartfelt warning to other parents to be vigilant after her son was sexually abused after being groomed while playing games online.

The Tameside mum - who is remaining anonymous to protect the identity of her son - has spoken about her experience to support the Greater Manchester It’s Not Okay campaign Week of Action, which is running from 18 -24 June to raise awareness of steps parents can take to protect their children from sexual exploitation.

She told how her then 12-year-old son was targeted by a 23-year-old “friend of a friend” who groomed him both while he was playing games online and while he was out playing football on sports fields close to his home.

His parents had spotted changes in his behaviour but had put it down to his age.

His mum said: “He had always been an outgoing, sociable and happy lad but we noticed he had got quieter and more withdrawn – he lost weight and shut himself away in his room all of the time.

“We were worried, but after speaking to friends with children the same age, we put it down to hormones and being a teenager – although we hadn’t experienced anything like this with our older son.

“After about six months he broke down one day, gave me a hug and told me he was gay. I hugged him back and told him I loved him and that it didn’t matter and for a short while everything went back to normal. But then things started going downhill again and he got more and more distant.”

The offences only came to light when, after months of abuse, her son broke down and confided in one of his teachers at school.

“I was devastated but also in a strange way relieved that now I finally knew what was wrong and that we could do something about it and help him. All the clues suddenly fell into place and it made sense of so much of his behaviour.

“For example he used to go to sleep with his headphones in, saying he was listening to music on his phone to calm him. But actually it was the offender who wouldn’t let him switch off and wanted to listen in – even when he was sleeping - to have 24-hour control.

“The offender had told our son he didn’t need his family, he just needed him. He had singled him out at a time when he was vulnerable after experiencing some bullying and made him feel special – buying him gifts and making him feel important.

“Our son had first got know the offender while out playing football with his friends and older brother – the offender was related to one of his brother’s friends. So all the things you worry about such as stranger danger was irrelevant – this was a friend of a friend who had even been in our house once.

“He took over our son’s life, grooming him, being in constant contact online, buying him Xbox games, manipulating him, and segregating him from his friends and family to gain total control.

“He eventually started meeting him straight from school and would take him to local playing fields where he would sexually assault him. He also convinced him he was gay – whereas now he realises he isn’t.”

Police launched an investigation as soon as the boy confided his experiences and the offender was charged with grooming and sexual abuse. He was found guilty in October 2017 and sentenced to six years in prison.

Three years on from the offences, her son is well on his way to being back on track in his life – he has just sat his GCSE’s and recently enjoyed his school prom.

His mum said: “It’s lovely to see a smile back on his face. There’s still a question mark over how much this is going to affect him into the future but he is having counselling and life is getting more back to normal.

“However, I’m not sure if I will ever be able to get over the guilt and heartbreak I feel as a mother that I wasn’t able to protect him. I just hope our experiences may help to warn others.

“Whenever I see children and young people out now I’m wondering about them – where are their parents, are the adults with them their parents or abusers – I see everything differently now.

“You also think your children are safe when they are in their bedrooms but that can be when they are at their most vulnerable – there are so many ways offenders can control them around the clock – be it via game consoles, Facebook, their phones and other social media.

“I would urge parents not to dismiss any radical changes in behaviour - you know your children, you must trust your instincts. Keep conversations about what they are doing, and who they are seeing, ongoing.

“Use all the security and parental settings available for phones, games and social media platforms. Don’t feel you are being too intrusive in their privacy – it is more important to protect them.”

For further information about child sexual exploitation, steps you can take to help keep your children safe, and guidance on support available and reporting any concerns see [www.itsnotokay.co.uk](http://www.itsnotokay.co.uk)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCD4n3AzVzA>