



In 2010, Ben, then 13, was the victim of grooming and sexual assault. Over a period of six months, a group of men aged from their early 20s to around 50, acting independently, used mobile phones to arrange clandestine meetings with him and persuaded the teenager to send and receive sexual images.

Although Ben's progress at school was faltering and his parents noticed deterioration in his behaviour, none of his family, police or health professionals suspected that the cause of the change was that he was being groomed and a victim of sexual abuse.

"We now realise the signs were there but our awareness was so far removed from our experience we didn't even consider it as a possible cause of what was happening. None of us did," says his dad David.

They found out by chance, in 2011, when Ben's mum overheard a late night telephone conversation between their son and a groomer who was encouraging him to travel more than 200 miles to meet him.

David explains: "We thought the damage had been confined to grooming, but we were wrong. In a state of shock, we were horrified by what had been done to him but we didn't know what to do. We soon realised that even though we had discovered what had gone on, the damage had already been done. We were playing catch up.

"We believed we could bring it to a close but the emotional and physical effects of these crimes go deep and the psychological harm is very hard to counter. We didn't know how long recovery would take and even, in the darkest days, if recovery was even possible.

"We learned that vulnerable kids are targeted and led to behave how the groomer directs. They drive an emotional wedge between the child, their family and friends and convince the child that it is acceptable to behave in ways that previously would have been abhorrent. There were attempts to lure him away from his family.

"They took an innocent boy and manipulated him to believe these men were friends and that their expressions of love were genuine. He was persuaded to believe that sexual interaction with so-called friends was OK. This was callous exploitation of a vulnerable child by adults who knew it was wrong.

"In a very few months he was transformed from being a popular boy to one who had few male friends. He was mature as a young teenager about being gay. But he went from being an entertainer and a lively boy to one who was withdrawn; from one who was relatively timid in unfamiliar situations to seeking contact with strangers on the web.

"He went from being a close and loving son to one who saw us and others who were trying to help him as the enemy. Amid all that he was self-harming. He had to go into programmes of counselling and psychiatric care.

"At the time we were totally lost. We tried to cut him off from his groomers but he found ways of getting round the roadblocks we put in his way. It was only by 2013 that we saw any sign of improvement because he was maturing.

"From 2012-2014, most of his attackers went through the criminal justice system and our son gave evidence at three trials. The experience was traumatic for him and distressing for all of us. As a minor he was allowed to testify and give evidence by video link but it doesn't prevent a young person from being bullied and subject to really aggressive cross-examination by defence counsel. It was devastating for our lad.

"The effects on my son and our family will not end. Things improve but the damage goes deep and it's truly life-changing.

"Through 2013 to today my son has improved but he's far from being emotionally robust. Although recognition is part of his recovery he also now must live with the memories of what was done."