

How do social workers pick up the pieces of online sexual abuse and support victims and their families to recover and go on to lead safe and fulfilling lives?

The electric gates that keep uninvited guests away from 12-year-old Jennifer's family home sadly were useless when it came to protecting her from unwanted visitors on her iPad.

Within two hours of receiving the gadget on Christmas Day, Jennifer had been coerced into taking and sharing intimate pictures of herself, and received similarly unpleasant images from a man. It was only when the pictures of a naked man started appearing on her mum's phone because of a shared family iTunes account that the crime was revealed.

Social worker Mandy first came into contact with the family a little while later when she was asked to discuss a delicate matter with the girl's headmaster, with whom she'd worked before on an online bullying education project.

"Jennifer's parents had been to see him because they were so distraught that their daughter had been groomed by someone via an app called Scout and that she had sent and been sent disgusting pictures. The parents just didn't know what to do.

"First I had to ascertain where the police were with their investigation. They had taken the iPad and were investigating if the perpetrator was working in a group and had other victims.

"They agreed I could meet with the family. My job was to help them all deal with their feelings of disgust, to explain how perpetrators work and that it wasn't their fault, and to work with them to help protect Jennifer in the future.

"The parents also needed an explanation as to why she'd done it. There were vulnerability factors that immediately jumped out at me. The girl had had a fight with friends at school and was getting support with her learning. The strapline of the site she'd been on was 'come and join us and make new friends' and that's all she wanted to do. Nevertheless, Jennifer seemed over compliant; she asked me if I wanted to see the photos, I said I didn't but it concerned me that she was so willing to share them.

"She was nervous and embarrassed but very articulate. She explained that the man had asked if she liked doing anything naughty but she hadn't known what he meant. I explained to her the sub text and helped her to understand it. She had been seriously groomed.

"She hadn't thought about losing control of the pictures and saw it as part of developing a relationship because he told her he'd be her very best friend, that he understood her and that it was an indication of their friendship that they could share intimate things.

"For Jennifer the impact was focused on feelings that she had let her parents down, her embarrassment at school knowing, how she had spoiled Christmas and would her parents ever trust her again. She felt duped and stupid.

"I explained that it wasn't about her, the responsibility was with the man and men like him are very skilled at what they do. It wasn't her failure, it was his manipulation. As adults it's our job to protect children and, even for an adult on dating sites, his wasn't normal behaviour.

"She knows the photos are out there and will never be brought back. She doesn't know yet how she feels about that.

"For the family, it was about leaving the door open to conversation. The damage had been limited this time but if it was ever to happen again the girl was to go straight to her parents.

"The father was naturally very protective of his wife and daughter but I was able to speak to mum on her own. She was devastated by it all. She felt she had a really close relationship with her daughter and that Jennifer could tell her anything. I explained that it can happen to anyone, it can happen very quickly and that it wasn't a reflection on their relationship.

"The initial contact we as social workers have with a family in this situation is very important. You are dealing with a family in grief. The life they thought they had is no longer and they have to come to terms with that. The best thing they could all do was to draw a line, step over it, move forward and allow time to heal the situation."