

Michael's Story



Michael's story illustrates how social media can be used by perpetrators to groom and exploit children. It shows how children can be groomed into involving other children and how perpetrators can use intimidation, threats and blackmail to force a child to comply with their demands.

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Michael is now 14 and lives with his mum and five younger siblings. His parents broke up 2 years ago and his dad still lives close by, with Michael seeing him at weekends. Michael has known for a while that he is gay but has not told his parents because he is frightened of how they'll react. He feels isolated at school and in his local community and he doesn't have any gay friends. He is keen to meet other young gay men and has started going online to try to find others who can provide him with advice and support.

He finds an online chat group and starts chatting with other young men who are all really supportive, he starts to feel accepted and part of a community.

Michael becomes particularly close to one male called Sean who says he is 16. Sean tells Michael that he is having a hard time at home and at school, and that it would really help if they could meet in person. When they meet up, Michael discovers that Sean is a lot older than he said and is, in fact, in his 20s.

At first, Michael is a bit unsure about Sean being older; but Sean is really understanding of Michael's situation and says that he is always there if Michael needs someone to talk to.

Over the next few weeks Michael and Sean meet a number of times. Sean continually tells Michael how much he values their friendship, and for the first time Michael feels that he has someone he can talk to. Their friendship soon develops into a sexual relationship. At home, Michael's mum has noticed that he has become more withdrawn – he no longer plays or helps out with his younger siblings and, when he is at home, he spends much of his time alone in his room on his computer.

At school, his teachers have noticed that he is no longer interested in school work, and has become irritable and short tempered. Both his mum and his teachers try to speak to him, but each time Michael responds angrily saying he just wants to be left alone.

Michael gets into an altercation with another pupil at school, resulting in the other pupil sustaining a cut lip and black eye. It is the first time that Michael has behaved in a physically abusive manner and results in him being suspended for 2 weeks. A police report is also submitted to the Children's Reporter. Following discussion with the school and duty social work, because it is an isolated incident, no further action is taken.

A month later the police attend Michael's home and he is arrested. Following an extensive police investigation, it has been discovered that Michael has been involved in encouraging girls to have sex with older men for money and alcohol. After being interviewed by the police, Michael returns home where he breaks down and discloses his

sexual relationship with Sean. He further discloses that, without him knowing, Sean had taken photographs of them engaging in sexual activity, and has threatened to share these images on social media and with his friends and family unless Michael did what Sean wanted. Sean told Michael he had to bring girls to Sean's house for 'parties'. At these parties Michael and the girls would be given alcohol and drugs and made to have sex with Sean and his friends. Michael also discloses that he was made to have sex with the girls against his wishes. The police are notified, and Sean and his friends are charged.

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