

by Amanda  
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**D**EBORAH CARVER will never forget the moment her confused young daughter called her over to the family computer to read a message she'd been sent.

'Look at this, Mummy,' said 11-year-old Sarah who, while too young to understand exactly what it meant, felt something was not quite right.

Deborah, 32, took one look at the message and went cold.

Unknown to her mother, two months before, Sarah had been contacted via her Facebook page by a 52-year-old man posing as a teenage boy called Tommy. He was now trying to arrange to meet her.

'He'd told her he had a "disco to do" as a DJ, and asked: "Do you want one?"' says Deborah, still clearly shocked by what happened.

'Sarah hadn't understood what he'd meant and asked: "Do I want one what?", to which he'd replied: "Do you want a disco — and me?"

'That's when Sarah, despite her innocence, had sensed something was wrong and turned to me.'

From that point on, a remarkable sequence of events began to unfold which saw Deborah turning detective and trapping a man who had set out to prey on her daughter.

As a result, last week Thomas Gibbs — who is married with two children — was sentenced to 18 months in prison after admitting two counts of travelling to meet a child following sexual grooming.

'I'm so thankful that Sarah came out of this relatively unscathed,' says her mother, speaking for the first time about her family's ordeal. 'But I can't help but think about all the other children he could have, or has already, targeted.'

'Parents need to be aware of what their children are doing on the internet and make them aware of the dangers. If it happened to a family like ours, it could happen to anyone.'

And it has. Earlier this year, paedophile Graeme Cox was jailed for filming himself raping a 12-year-old he'd groomed on the inter-

**'The reality of what he intended to do to my daughter hit home'**

net. In June, Daniel Hunsdon admitted kidnapping and having sex with a 13-year-old girl he'd met through the Bebo social networking site. She was so traumatised by her ordeal, she later tried to kill herself.

And last year Andrew Bond admitted raping a 14-year-old and molesting other young boys he had groomed on the web.

Yet despite these cases and many more making horrific headlines, thousands of parents still choose to turn a blind eye to the horrors the internet can allow into their homes.

Until that day last April when alarm bells first rang, Sarah was a typical, if shy and reserved, 11-year-old. With Hannah Montana posters on her wall, a love of ponies and the X Factor, she was young for her age and rarely let her mum out of her sight.

The problems began last Christmas when she asked Deborah, who is separated from Sarah's father, if she could set up a Facebook account — even though she wasn't yet 13, the minimum age required to join.

Her mother was faced with an all-too-familiar dilemma for parents in this age of social networking. Do you deny your daughter the chance to be like her friends and risk her being bullied by her peers by saying no? Or do you agree — and potentially expose her to the sexual predators who use the internet to reach vulnerable children?

After thinking long and hard, Deborah reluctantly agreed. 'I thought it might be a good way for Sarah to keep in touch with her father and grandparents, who live in other parts of the country.'

'I must admit I thought it would be safe because she has to ask to use the computer, we monitor her time on it and it's in the lounge where we can see what's going on.'

How many other parents have taken the same decision? Britain has 23 million Facebook users, five million of whom admit to being under 19. But it's impossible to know how many of these are under 13 because no proof of age is required when setting up a free account with the service.

Crucially, Sarah decided to keep her profile 'open', meaning that anyone could see her details online and send her a message. She was also naive enough — though many others do the same thing — to reveal the Oxfordshire village she lived in, which was just a few miles from Thomas Gibbs' Witney home, and she

# What would you do if YOUR child was being groomed on Facebook by a 52-year-old paedophile posing as a young boy? Read how this girl's mother exacted devastating revenge

posted a picture of herself wearing a jokey pair of spectacles, which clearly shows she is underage.

It might have been these factors that drew Gibbs to her as he trawled Facebook. After settling on her home page, he emailed her posing as a boy of 16 called Tommy, and soon — unknown to her parents — they began messaging each other with general chat about what they had been doing during the day.

It was only when he finally asked to meet her that night in April that Sarah became concerned and told her mother what he'd written.

When Deborah saw the message, she immediately sent her daughter to bed and, without thinking, replied to Gibbs' herself, asking what he meant.

'He replied "I like you" and "let's meet tonight",' she says. 'I immediately became suspicious that this person wanted to meet my daughter, and my hands were shaking so much I could barely type to reply that I couldn't meet him. I was horrified that someone appeared to be trying to groom an innocent 11-year-old over the internet.'

Deborah delicately tried to explain

to Sarah what had happened and why it was wrong but she doesn't know if her daughter fully understood the implications.

The next evening, having asked Sarah not to use the computer for a few days, Deborah logged on — and found that 'Tommy' had contacted Sarah again. He began with a pre-arranged asking how her day had been. But then he started to write that he wanted her to be his girlfriend.

At that point, Deborah became increasingly concerned that 'Tommy' wasn't all he seemed, and might not have been the teenager he purported to be. To find out, she decided to take on her daughter's persona and see exactly what this person was saying to Sarah.

'Over the next week, my fiancé John and I became "Sarah" on the internet. Every time we logged on, he was there in an instant. It was as if he was sitting there lying in wait for her to come online.'

'It took time to reply to him because we were trying to think and write like an 11-year-old. He kept writing over and over again. "I love you. Do you love me? Will you be my girlfriend?", and I had to deal with a

constant feeling of nausea knowing I was "chatting" to a person with designs on my child.

'He said he wanted to take Sarah ice skating and to the cinema. That he wanted to buy her a "love you ring", and that she could go and live with him. He even asked what she would wear if they met up and suggested she put on a miniskirt.'

'He would say he wanted to show her love, and I had to walk away from

**'He seemed to be lying in wait for her to log on'**

the computer when he once said: "I want to kiss you, I want you, my love."

'He was very clever, however, with how he said things. We later found out that if he had made any sexual comments, other than wanting Sarah to kiss him, he would have been looking at a lot longer in prison when he was caught. These sexual

predators aren't stupid. They know what they are doing and how far they can go, and there are far more of them out there than any parent suspects.'

Detective Chief Inspector Nick Stevens, the head of Scotland Yard's Paedophile Unit, agrees: 'The fact is if I had three times the amount of staff tackling child abuse on the internet, I would still be struggling to cope with the demand.' Other officers estimate the number of cases increases by 30 per cent each year.

The problem is compounded by the sheer number of children who have computers at home — three out of four aged between nine and 19 can access the internet in their own house.

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, a police-backed watchdog, estimates 31 per cent of young people have received unwanted sexual remarks online or via a text message. However, only 7 per cent of their parents were aware of it.

Certainly, Gibbs knew what he was doing when, after a week of talking to Deborah online — still thinking she was Sarah — he suggested they

**Narrow escape: Sarah had been chatting to 'Tommy' online for two months before telling her mother**

meet up at a local landmark, stressing she must not tell her parents.

Deborah decided to say that Sarah would keep the rendezvous, so she could go and watch from a safe distance to see what he looked like.

'When he arrived, I saw this unshaven man wearing jeans and a white T-shirt and with a baseball cap on backwards. I went white and started shaking.'

'The reality of what this man intended to do to my daughter finally hit home. I had to force back the tears. Everything went hazy for a few minutes, but I forced myself to keep it together.'

Gibbs waited ten minutes before going back to his van. When Deborah logged onto the computer later, he messaged immediately to find out what had gone wrong. She fobbed him off, but he immediately insisted they meet later that night — in a local park — adding: "Don't tell your mum."

This time it was John who went and watched Gibbs arrive in his transit van. Once again, he waited for some time before driving away.

Enough was enough. The next day, Deborah, who is an assistant in a local care home, reported 'Tommy' to police and was immediately visited by two officers.

Having investigated what she said and taken statements, they examined the Facebook communications on Sarah's family computer and were able to trace 'Tommy' via his own internet home page and discover that he was Thomas Gibbs.

A week later, having recovered the CCTV footage of him waiting to meet Sarah in his van, he was arrested at his home. In the meantime, he'd been trying desperately

**He said 'I am your boyfriend. I love you. You love me'**

to contact Sarah via Facebook, saying: 'I am your boyfriend. I love you. You love me,' again and again. Gibbs denied the charges and was given bail.

'John and I were desperately relieved that action was being taken, but Sarah was confused,' says Deborah. 'The first thing she asked us was: "Will he go to prison?" We had to be honest and tell her that we didn't know.'

'For about a month afterwards, she went through a very quiet stage and hardly went out, but she gradually began to come out of her shell, and get back to her old self.'

Police confiscated Gibbs' computer and found he had other young girls as Facebook 'friends'. Thanks to those records and the CCTV images of him waiting in vain as her parents watched, he pleaded guilty on November 30 and was sentenced last Monday.

'I went to Oxford Crown Court to see him,' says Deborah. 'Sitting there in the dock, he looked as if he couldn't care less. I had to force myself to look at him.'

'We were delighted at the sentence — we'd been warned he might just get a slap on the wrist. Sarah was really pleased when we told her, although being a child she doesn't really understand why he'll eventually be allowed out. But at least she was able to enjoy Christmas.'

Sarah is safe for now. But until parents wake up to the dangers of Facebook and other social networking sites, how many more families will find their children being ruthlessly targeted by paedophiles?

■ THE family's names have been changed to protect the identity of the child.

Picture: BEN LISTER