Back from the brink
An ASIO visit delivered a shock to parents unaware of their teenage son’s flirtation with Islamic State.

It was late afternoon when the ASIO officers arrived at Amal’s door. The western Sydney mother had just said goodbye to her husband and was pottering about the house, her hijab off, her thoughts a thousand miles from the earthquake about to rock her family.

On the other side of the door stood about a dozen ASIO officers, police and counter-terrorism detectives. They were polite, but insistent. English is Amal’s second language, but it seemed they had a warrant.

Before she could put on her hijab, they had barged through the door, fearful someone could destroy evidence that might be inside the house.

What happened next was every parent’s worst nightmare. One of the officers called Amal’s husband, Bassam, and told him to come home immediately.

The ASIO officers sat the couple down and calmly explained that their son, Hakim, had been associating online with radicals from Islamic State. The contact had been intercepted and now everybody – ASIO, the Australian Federal Police, the NSW counter-terrorism squad – wanted desperately to know exactly what the 15-year-old had been doing.

For Bassam, the next few hours were a blur. Teams of police passed through the house, seizing the family computer, iPads and Hakim’s mobile phone. Bassam’s wife wept. He nearly fainted.

A thousand questions swirled in his mind. One in particular emerged from the fog: how do I pull my son back from the brink?

No jihadist movement has radicalised as many young Western Muslims as Islamic State. The violent strain of Salafist Islam practised by this group is not new, but its success on the battlefield coupled with its highly effective propaganda machine has breathed fresh life into an old creed, introducing it to a new generation of Muslims.

Deradicalising these young minds has become a top priority for counter-terrorism authorities across the world.

NSW police Deputy Commissioner Catherine Burn heads the state’s intervention program, which began in February. “This is in some ways a social science,” Deputy Commissioner Burn says. “We’ve got people who are potentially radicalised to violence, but we know there are some interventions… we can assist with that will put them on another path. Our whole focus is prevention.”

Australia’s deradicalisation program begins with the National Disruption Group, a sprawling inter-agency taskforce made up of police, intelligence agencies, and bureaucrats. The group functions as a sort of clearing house for deradicalisation candidates. It was the first port of call for the 17-year-old stopped at Sydney airport on his way to Syria, and the 15-year-old schoolboy caught preaching jihad in the playground.

The main role of the group, led by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) in Canberra, is ‘de-confliction’: identifying and reconciling the sometimes competing interests of police, intelligence agencies and other bureaucrats.

The Department of Education may want a student deradicalised, but if he is the subject of an active ASIO investigation, that may not be an option. One of the first things that occurs is a threat assessment to determine how dangerous a person is: police, intelligence officers and a psychologist from the Australian Crime Commission are involved in the process. Some candidates may be considered too far gone for intervention, in which case they are rejected.

“Some of these people may be on the periphery of investigation, so whatever [the] treatment or strategy, you’ve got to be careful you are not impacting on any current investigation,” says Jenny Cartwright, diversion co-ordinator with the AFP’s counter-terrorism team.

On paper, the process is simple. In practice, it is far more fluid. Counter-terrorism investigations are shifting and opaque. A suspect considered peripheral to an investigation one day can become central the next if his voice is captured on a telephone intercept planning an attack.

NSW has about 20 young Muslims on the books for its intervention program, but any of them, at any given moment, could be snatched back by detectives as part of a live investigation. However, if all goes well a person is referred by the AFP to the state police for intervention.

The AFP’s Cartwright says, “My team identifies suitable candidates for diversion activities: (those who are) displaying concerning behaviour and may be on the...
path to radicalisation, what can we do to intervene to put this person on the right path?

“So if we’ve been given a green light (from investigators and intelligence agencies), we build up a picture about this individual: what is it that brought them to our attention, information (that could) allow us to pass (them) on to states and territories.”

That’s how Hakim found himself working with the NSW Police Force, rather than languishing in a maximum-security prison or dying a grisly death in Syria or Iraq.

“The biggest thing I’ve learned in this whole process is it can happen anywhere,” father Bassam tells The Weekend Australian.

“I definitely thought it would never happen in my home, but it can happen anywhere.”

Hakim’s case is typical. Initially of intense interest to investigators, he was referred for intervention after it became clear he no longer posed a threat. Hakim’s flirtation with Islamic State was triggered by bullying at school. Since Year 8, he had copped it in the playground. Hakim’s a big kid, which, according to Bassam, made things worse. “He is a bit of an emotional sort of bloke,” his dad says. “Although he’s a big lad, words can make him cry. I think he probably felt a bit of shame in that, being a big boy and being so easily targeted.”

Hakim’s problem got so bad that his parents moved him to a new school. For a while, that seemed to help. Hakim seemed happier; his grades picked up. But before long he was again morose, disengaged and skipping school.

“I’d come home during the day and he’d be asleep,” Bassam says. “He wouldn’t go anywhere, he’d just stay at home and sleep.”

Looking back, he can now see a different explanation for his son’s behaviour: “He’d probably been up through the night, and that’s why he didn’t want to get up in the morning – the was) probably on the net or whatever.”

Hakim came from a good, happy family, but many of the people who find themselves on the program’s books do not fit that category. Hakim’s father is a second generation Lebanese Australian who is self-employed. He met Hakim’s mother while working in Lebanon. They live in western Sydney with Hakim’s two siblings. Bassam is handsome, intelligent and well-spoken. He could be from working-class Footscray or Roseville rather than Lebanon there’s no trace of an accent. The family is religious, but quietly so. Amal prays five times a day but Bassam admits to being pretty lax. He’s busy, he says.

Since the age of seven, Hakim and his siblings have fasted during Ramadan, but that’s about the extent of the family’s piety.

“Religion is in the heart and the home, and that’s where we keep it,” Bassam says. “Or that’s where I thought I kept it.”

For Bassam and his wife, the challenge lay in identifying which parts of their son’s unhappiness was normal teenage angst and what was part of a larger problem. Hakim lived in his bedroom and was chained to his mobile phone. But what kid isn’t?

“We were lucky to have a TV in our room,” Bassam says. “These days, they’ve got everything they want in their room.”

Five-point plan for deradicalisation

1. Identify worrying behaviour by someone not already under investigation.
2. Build up a life picture of this person and assess the risk they pose.
3. Approach this person and their family, explain the deradicalisation program and ask what authorities can do to help.
4. Tailor an individual program for this person, possibly including counselling and mentoring, employment training, religious guidance, and psychological services.
5. Follow through at a personal level for as long as it takes until behaviour patterns start to change.

Source: Australia’s National Disruption Centre
Interventions targeted at those extremism programs, including in violent extremism anywhere have led to an actual reduction in cohesion or prevention initiatives. Research to suggest that social evaluation or evidence-based programs have their critics, largely because they've done. All we can do is focus on behaviour and indicators and try to treat it. “It’s more about: what are these other things that are impacting, what path are they going down?”

She acknowledges that religion plays a role, but says other factors are often at play. “The FBI people we’ve had out have pretty much said it’s not about religion, from the work that they’ve done. All we can do is look for changes in behaviour long before they come on to the radar of security agencies.”

“Police are also reluctant to talk publicly about how these diversion programs are operating and precisely who they are targeting, as they fear it could be counter-productive. The mere fact of telling a youth that he is a part of a formal counter-terrorism diversion program could be enough to scare them away and reduce the likelihood of reform. Thus a level of opaqueness surrounds these programs, which makes them harder to assess from the outside and to understand what works and doesn’t work.”

This article was published as ‘ASIO knock left teen’s parents reeling’ in the Weekend Australian on 19 December 2015. The names of some of the people have been changed to maintain privacy.