



## **Safeguarding concern: ReadTheory Website**

### **Jonny Timms**

ReadTheory is an education web site from the US that offers online reading activities for 'all ages and abilities'. Some schools are using the website in school time, and recommending it for homework.

ReadTheory is free to use, children can set up accounts, and teachers can set up accounts for their pupils, even if they are under-13.

#### **Inappropriate advertising and web links**

I created a pupil account and had a look. The site is funded by Google AdSense adverts, so it can be free to use. I used the site for about half-an-hour and found no inappropriate adverts on the site itself, but when you link to those ads, they offer further adverts. The ads on these sites offered links to other sites, including a fashion site called 'stylebistro', which in turn easily led to a dating site with inappropriate images of women, and then a further site for children's maths quizzes on the same page. I felt the juxtaposition was highly inappropriate.

On their website, ReadTheory have a FAQ page and one question is "My students found an advertisement on your site that makes us uncomfortable. What should we do?"

The company says, "Our ads come to us from a third-party aggregator. We diligently maintain a blacklist of any advertisers that are not appropriate for children so that these companies will not appear on our site. If you or your students ever encounter an ad that you find inappropriate, please report it to us so that we can add it to our blacklist immediately."

It is clearly a frequent issue, for them to include it in their FAQs.

#### **Privacy Policy**

I think the site's privacy policy also raises concerns. The policy says ReadTheory does not share personal information, and then sets out five exceptions. "Additionally, we may share your or your student's personal information with new teachers who use the Services in their classrooms when you or your student, as applicable, enrol in such teachers' classes, and we may share teacher's personal information with other teachers within a school using the Services."

For UK schools it must be remembered that this personal data is being processed in the US by a company not recognised by the EU for that purpose, in breach of the eighth data protection principle (<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/principle-8-international>).

#### **Summary**

You will need to take your own view on whether ReadTheory should be used at home with your children. We will not be using it at Caldicott; our view is that it has several safeguarding risks and should be avoided. In particular, third-party ads lead to inappropriate sites, and personal data is being collected and processed outside the EU.