

# THE BALTIMORE SUN

## A TikTok challenge killed our son, now we fight for other children's safety By Todd Minor Sr.



Matthew Minor died in 2019 at the age of 12 after participating in a TikTok challenge, according to his parents. (HANDOUT/THE BALTIMORE SUN)



By [TODD MINOR SR.](#)

PUBLISHED: January 24, 2024 at 11:48 a.m. | UPDATED: January 24, 2024 at 11:49 a.m.

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One evening in 2019, my wife, Mia, and I were cleaning up in the kitchen when our world was forever changed. Our son T.J. burst downstairs, pleading to us to come help — something terrible had happened to his brother Matthew. Although Mia was starting new treatments for multiple sclerosis and I was recovering from cancer surgery and a resulting leg injury, I found myself running upstairs without a walker to check on Matt, adrenaline surging.

My military training kicked in as I immediately assessed the situation. Matt had something tied around his neck. Why was that there? Find out later, I told myself. I removed the cord and began CPR as Mia called 911. While I continued compressions, we asked the Almighty why this was happening and to take us instead. Matt was only 12. Eventually, the EMTs came and took us all to the hospital; at around 2:30 AM, a doctor came in and notified us that Matthew had died. It was unbelievable and shocking; we had just eaten dinner.

In the wake of our son's tragic passing, Mia and I were approached by members of our local, school and faith communities in Maryland who encouraged us to speak out against online challenges like the "choking challenge" that took Matthew's life. As grieving parents, we were initially hesitant, but our perspective shifted when we revisited some of the heartfelt cards and tributes sent to us by Matthew's friends and classmates.

These messages weren't just expressions of sympathy; they revealed a startling awareness among his peers about the kind of dangerous online challenge that took his life. Many kids confided that seeing the consequences of what happened to Matthew had improved their online safety habits and deterred them from participating in risky activities. This realization was a turning point for us.

To our community, Matthew, who would have turned 17 last month, was more than just our son. He was known at Accokeek Academy as the school's "Ambassador" — always ready to help a classmate, stand up to a bully, or offer one of his famous hugs.

Inspired by his spirit, our mission became clear: Now, we are continuing Matthew's legacy of protection and advocacy on a broader scale. We've joined forces with other parents as well as educators, mental health professionals, and other concerned community members to support the [Maryland Kids Code](#) bill and similar legislative efforts [across the country](#), becoming voices in a growing movement that seeks to hold tech companies accountable.

These laws, which are "Age Appropriate Design" model bills, represent a critical step in shifting the burden of online safety from resting solely on families to being shared

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with the digital platforms themselves from the moment they design their products. Tech companies would have to design any app or website intended for young users, with kids' best interests in mind — including avoiding manipulative design features and making sure that privacy settings for children are set at a high level by default.

As we've connected with parents across the country, it's become clear that what happened to Matthew was far from an isolated incident. Instead, it was part of a disturbing pattern of kids' deaths linked to mental and behavioral health struggles that the [U.S. Surgeon General](#) has called a national crisis fueled in part by social media. In the name of profit, these companies are maximizing our kids' engagement with online platforms at any cost. We can't count on these tech companies to police themselves; clearly, that hasn't worked.

What we need is legislative action to force social media companies and other digital service providers to prioritize the well-being of their youngest users. That means that corporate profits cannot override mitigating foreseeable risks of harm to kids — like avoiding algorithms that push unsolicited videos about dangerous challenges. Until something changes, these companies will keep maximizing our kids' engagement at any cost, all in the name of profit.

There's no time to waste, which is why we're encouraged to see growing momentum across the country, with progress on the national level with the [Kids Online Safety Act](#) and bills being introduced this month in states from Maryland to New Mexico to Vermont. Kids Code legislation offers parents and kids more than just a set of rules; it provides a resilient design framework that could prevent other families from enduring the kind of pain ours has faced.

Ultimately, that's our motivation for calling on parents, kids and communities across the country to join us in this advocacy. For us, it's a campaign born from the deepest loss, driven by the love and memory of a young boy who always worked hard to protect others.

*Todd Minor Sr. and his wife Mia lost their youngest son, Matthew, in 2019 to the TikTok "Blackout" challenge. By increasing awareness of online dangers as advocates and through their Matthew E. Minor Awareness Foundation ([matthewminorfoundation.org](http://matthewminorfoundation.org)), they seek to protect other parents and families from the tragedy they have experienced.*