Dawn Erickson noticed the first signs of her family’s medical troubles four years ago when her middle son, Ryan, starting blinking while playing with his brothers out in the yard.

She first suspected allergies and when the blinking progressed, she feared a vision problem and made an appointment with the eye doctor.

But Ryan’s eyesight tested fine. And then he started making facial grimaces along with head and shoulder shrugs. Specialists eventually diagnosed a neurological disorder.

Within a year, Ryan’s big brother, Joshua, started coughing repeatedly. Then he started shrugging his shoulders.

“A familiar pattern emerged,” Erickson said.

The Erickson boys are among hundreds of thousands of children in America coping with Tourette syndrome, a physical disorder of the brain that causes involuntary movements and vocalizations. Ryan and Joshua, students at Nathaniel Morton Elementary School, contend with both simple and complex motor and vocal tics.

Ryan, a third grader, blinks, grimaces, shrugs and grunts, though not all at once. Joshua, a fifth grader, snaps his wrist, jerks his neck, coughs and clicks his tongue. The tics wax and wane and change altogether over time. Sometimes they are hardly noticeable. Sometimes, they are bad enough to keep Josh from writing sentences.

Their boys’ little brother, Shayne, a first grader at the school, has shown no signs yet of being affected by the disorder. But if he carries the inherited gene, he has a 99 percent chance of developing tics as well.

While the symptoms of the disorder can sometimes be managed with medications, there is no cure for Tourette syndrome. The Ericksons focus more on education.

Students in Nathaniel Morton Elementary School may be among the most knowledgeable children in American when it comes to Tourette syndrome. That’s because Dawn Erickson presents programs on the disorder to her sons’ classes every year.

Meeting the challenge – Ryan Erickson and his older brother, Josh, both of whom suffer from Tourette syndrome, ride their bikes in the backyard.
'It doesn't make you any different'

Erickson's first Alfa Moment came with Ryan's doctor connected the boy's clicking (a motor tic) with his habit of clearing his throat (a vocal tic). The boy had been driving his family nuts by constantly clearing his throat in the months leading up to his diagnosis.

The Alfa Moment for Josh came with the realization the boy's childhood did not have to do with a cold. Laura Finkel, Josh's second-grade teacher, started noticing facial contortions at the same time. She wondered if fatigue or stress might not be bothering the boy.

Together, mother and teacher arrived at the real problem, long before the actual diagnosis, and set in motion a plan that has been seen both Erickson boys through elementary school.

Finkel and Erickson devised a strategy first for Josh and later in that spring in case their tics ever became overwhelming during class. The boys would simply ask to get a drink or use the restroom and then let their bodies loosen up in the hallway. It helped that other children in the class had an understanding of what was happening and why. "They noticed it, but once they knew what it was it almost gave them permission not to worry about it," Finkel said. "I think the kids in the class became very educated about it. As an educator, I learned there is nothing you can do about it. He's gotta express those tics. It's disruptive, we have a system."

The Ericksons helped host a reception last weekend at the New England Aquarium in Boston celebrating the release of the HBO documentary, "I Have Tourette's, But Tourette's Doesn't Have Me." The 30-minute program presents a candid look at children growing up with the condition and explores what it is like to live with the disorder. About 200 people, including two of the children featured in the documentary, attended.

For the boys, the reception offered an opportunity to get together with others coping with tics. They shared laughs, they shared stories. They shared strategies.

Back at home in Lynnfield, playing basketball after school in their neighborhood courts, the boys seem relaxed and at ease, even with the occasional tic.

From Blanket repeatedly and Josh with a tic after spitting out something that could be mistaken for a swallow. They both then move into their respective classrooms, sometimes with other kids watching on the sidelines.

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Brothers - Ryan and Josh Erickson, who suffer from Tourette syndrome, pose with their younger brother, Shayan, under their basketball hoop.
Shayne Erickson, 6, not diagnosed with the disorder his older brothers share, plays with a Wiffle ball in the backyard.

Josh Erickson, 10, shoots hoops with his brothers in their backyard.