

Cancer kids' families hear message of hope

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Arranging colourful stickers on a paper mural at Windsor Regional Hospital Wednesday, Natalie Abdallah looked like a typical five-year-old.

Wide-eyed and smiling, the little girl jumped at the chance to create her own artwork on a carpet-sized sheet of paper taped to the floor for kids to write, draw and paint on.

There were no visible signs Wednesday of Natalie's courageous battle with leukemia, during which she lost her dark hair twice following intensive chemotherapy treatments. Sporting a short haircut, Natalie looked healthy and happy.



CELEBRATING LIFE: Cancer survivors Luca Aversa, left, and Justina Warren chase bubbles at Windsor Regional Hospital during a kickoff for Childhood Cancer Awareness Day on Wednesday.

But her mother, Rima Abdallah, remembers a more difficult chapter in her daughter's life, when battling cancer came before playing and drawing.

"It was very tough on her," Abdallah said Wednesday during a childhood cancer awareness event at Windsor Regional's Met campus, cradling her younger daughter, 11/2-year-old Nadine.

"I was pregnant when (Natalie) was diagnosed. Her treatments were difficult. But she is doing really good now."

Abdallah joined other local parents whose children are living with cancer or its aftermath to share their experiences and offer a message of hope to all families in the region affected by the disease. September is childhood cancer awareness month.

SATELLITE UNIT

Windsor Regional has a pediatric oncology satellite unit where child cancer patients can get their bloodwork done and go for checkups and chemo treatments, reducing the number of trips to hospitals in London or Toronto.

Kathy Lyons, director of pediatric services at Windsor Regional, said the unit has recorded 258 visits this year and 11 new childhood cancer diagnoses in the community.

"That's a significant number," said Marianne Hebb, executive director of Childcan, which raises funds in Southwestern Ontario to support children living with cancer and their families.

Kate Aversa, whose toddler son Luca was diagnosed with a type of cancer called neuroblastoma when he was four months old, spoke about financial and emotional hardships families of cancer-stricken children have to endure.

Worst of all, Aversa said, she had to explain to her other children what was happening to Luca.

"My seven-year-old daughter came to me one day and asked ... whether Luca would die," Aversa said through tears. "How do you answer that as a parent?"

Justina Warren, a Windsor teen who fought T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia for three years before the cancer was beaten into remission, told the crowd victims of childhood cancer "will endure more than most adults do in a lifetime.

"So make a difference in the life of a child with cancer ... hug them a little tighter," she said.