

Give children credit and they will thrive

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Melody Dernocoeur was your typical 14-year-old. Her biggest concerns were friends and clothes – like a lot of teenagers. She couldn't imagine problems much bigger than her own.

But after attending a leadership camp run by our partner organization Leaders Today, Melody's perspective began to widen.

For the first time, she took notice of the world outside her own and met people her age who were interested in social change. When they told her about a volunteer trip to Thailand, Melody jumped at the chance. She spent a month teaching English there with a group of North American students. As it turned out, she was the one learning lessons – about life.

Melody and the other youth were introduced to important social issues such as child labour and AIDS, and seeing the impact of these problems. From orphanages to the infamous Patpong red light district of Bangkok, they saw poverty and exploitation first hand – things they had only heard about back home.

"I just got completely overwhelmed," Melody says. "Are we really so backward that we actually live in a world where such things happen to children? I think I needed to see the ugly side of it to really understand it more."

Melody returned to her Michigan home a changed person.

She began speaking to youth in her area about social issues and the value of helping those who need it. Together, they raised \$6,000 to help children in the developing world.

"I learned that it wasn't all about myself," Melody says about her trip. "I could be who I was, but be a part of something larger than myself."

Thailand was Melody's coming of age. She is no longer interested in being cool or looking stylish. Her passions, goals and even her friends have changed. Now she wants to make a difference in the world.

But for most youth, opportunities for this kind of personal growth are rare.



Young volunteers for Leaders Today work alongside community members, helping to build a Free The Children school in Calcutta, India.

That's because they are sequestered from responsibility, instead surrounded by television, malls and video games.

In this sheltered environment, they have few chances to test themselves, learn about who they are or what they want to become.

In our travels we have seen two extremes of child development. In poor countries, millions of young people are forced to work, usually instead of going to school, and often in hazardous conditions. Some support entire families while others fight in wars.

This means they are forced to develop – physically, intellectually and emotionally – far too fast.

In rich countries, this development is delayed.

Young people are considered adults-in-waiting and are constantly told they are too young to challenge themselves.

They are often at the receiving end of everything – instructions from adults, homework from teachers, allowances from parents – and are expected to wait until they get older to contribute to society.

This can be incredibly discouraging for a young person. A recent survey of Canadian high school students found that while three-quarters think they can make a difference in the world, more than half worry they're not taken seriously because of their age.

If they believe no one will listen, they are less likely to try.

When Craig began campaigning for child rights at the age of 12, one of his biggest hurdles was convincing people he wasn't "just a kid." One person went as far as to tell him that "children should be seen and not heard."

But we've met thousands of youth who are full of opinions, ideas and dreams – youth who are making a difference.

Children are capable of so much more than they're given credit for.

These young people are idealistic and believe in a better tomorrow. They are not afraid to tackle what once seemed impossible and make it a reality.

Melody, who is now a facilitator at the Leaders Today camp, is constantly amazed by how youth respond when they are taken seriously.

"They light up," she says. "By the end of the week, they don't even need me any more."

The youth become more confident, outspoken and courageous. They volunteer, reach out to others and – like Melody – turn into leaders within their schools and their communities.

They become responsible citizens. Of course, this isn't something that can simply be turned on once a young person reaches voting age. It must be nurtured by allowing youth to take on responsibility, test who they are and even push the limits of their comfort zones.

But this doesn't mean all young people have to travel halfway around the world to experience their coming of age – there is no shortage of opportunities here at home. Whether it's

volunteering at a food bank, reading and discussing articles in the newspaper, or becoming involved in a social cause, when young people are challenged, they thrive.

Craig and Marc Kielburger are founders of *Free the Children* and co-authors of *Me to We*.