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Johns Hopkins University Study Confirms Experience Corps Improves Older Adults' Brain Functioning

WASHINGTON, DC – Older Americans can delay or actually reverse brain aging at a neurological level by tutoring young children in reading and math, according to a new Johns Hopkins study of the national service program Experience Corps. The study appeared in the December 2009 issue of the *Journal of Gerontology: Medical Sciences*.

Experience Corps, a national service program that trains volunteers to help low-income children struggling to read in urban public schools, places teams of older adults into local Baltimore City elementary schools to work 15 hours a week in grades K-3. They tutor and mentor children one-on-one and in small groups to improve reading and math skills.

Michelle Carlson, an Associate Professor in the Department of Mental Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (SPH) in Baltimore, MD, and Associate Director in the Center on Aging and Health, led the neuroimaging study to see if increasing activity could delay age-related changes in the brain that occur in older adults.

"We found that participating in Experience Corps resulted in improvements in cognitive functioning and this was associated with significant changes in brain activation patterns," Carlson said. "Essentially the intervention improved brain and cognitive function in these older adults."

The study published in the *Journal of Gerontology: Medical Sciences*, *Evidence for Neurocognitive Plasticity in At-Risk Older Adults: the Experience Corps Program*, suggests that one could reverse the decline once thought inevitable with age. The research suggests that interventions designed to promote health and function through everyday activity may improve the brain's plasticity, or the ability to bounce back, in key regions that support executive function. Future research could probe exactly what interventions are most successful and to what extent cognitive and brain deficits can be reversed.

"We've long known that older adults, and particularly our Experience Corps members, want to give back to their community," said Lester Strong, CEO of Experience Corps. "But this research highlights Experience Corps's unique ability to improve an aging population's cognitive ability and overall health and well-being."

"While the results of this study are preliminary, they hold promise for enhancing and maintaining brain reserve in later life, particularly among sedentary individuals who may benefit most urgently from behavioral interventions like Experience Corps," said Dr. Carlson, who is now leading a larger fMRI trial as part of a large-scale randomized trial of the Baltimore Experience Corps Program.

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The Experience Corps program (www.experiencecorps.org) brings older adults aged 55+ into public elementary schools to tutor and mentor children who are at risk of academic failure. The Experience Corps program began in 1995 in five cities and has grown to include 22 sites. Currently, there are nearly 2,000 Experience Corps tutors serving more than 20,000 students.

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