

John B. Wright Elementary School third-grader **Damien Cuen, 8**, receives pointers from coach **Alex Chernobelskiy, 18**, during an after-school table tennis program that started in January.

Photos by
NORMA JEAN GARGASZ
Tucson Citizen

At play

GETTING PADDLED

Wright kids can't go wrong with after-school table tennis club

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Clutching brand-new paddles, table tennis balls straight from the package and plenty of excitement, students at John B. Wright Elementary School were ready to learn the game.

"I've never played, but I think I will be pretty good," said **Alicia Saeric, 11**, a fifth-grader.

Since last month, nearly 20 students have participated in an after-school table tennis club that Wright, 4311 E. Linden St., offers its third-through fifth-graders free of charge.

Mikhail Chernobelskiy and son, **Alex, 18**, who both

emigrated from Russia eight years ago, wanted to start the club to help out the midtown community. They also wanted to give students a chance to share in their passion for table tennis.

With the help of the Midtown Neighborhood Association, the Southern Arizona Table Tennis Association and DHS, a table tennis company, their vision to begin the club at the elementary school became reality.

"We want to enhance the lives of these students," said **Mikhail Chernobelskiy**, one of the club's instructors. "Kids can relax and play and learn something that helps them improve and concentrate on their academics with table tennis."

Alex Chernobelskiy has held the title as the state junior table tennis champion for five years and is a certified coach. He said the game teaches kids valuable skills and gives them a chance to do something

TABLE TENNIS, ANYONE?

Find out more about the sport of table tennis at the Southern Arizona Table Tennis Association's Web site, www.tucsontabletennis.com.

productive with their time after school. He started playing table tennis as a child because his dad loved to play, and Alex has not stopped.

Howard Ward, who helped sponsor the club as the former president of the Midtown Neighborhood Association, said, "I know when I was a kid, after-school programs gave me something constructive to do with my time."

Before students learn tricky backhand, lobbing and spin moves, the Chernobelskiys take them through the basics. They learn to make contact between the paddle and the ball, which is fed to them through an automatic machine. **Alex Chernobelskiy** gives students advice on improving their swings.

The Chernobelskiys believe the program will enhance the students' lives. They hope eventually to expand it to other schools.

"I don't know what to expect, but my mom said if I join, I can't quit," said **Holly Fanlon, 10**, a fourth-grader.

Holly pointed out several times that if she was not playing table tennis, she probably would be at home watching television.

For **Ward** and the Chernobelskiys, getting kids away from the television and doing something productive is one of the most important benefits.

"I think the road to success in our city is small little efforts like this," **Ward** said. "It will go a lot farther than one \$1 million project."



LEFT: Wright fourth-grader **Gibson Gagnon, 9**, takes a shot as others wait their turn. **ABOVE:** Third-grader **Esteban Jorqueras, 9**, takes aim under the watchful eye of coach **Alex Chernobelskiy**. **TOP:** Second-grader **Aidan Cromer, 8**, hones his table tennis skills.