

# 變本加厲

*bian4 ben3 jia1 li4*

All Hong Kong parents know the saying “winning at the starting line”. The idea is to start getting children in competition mode ahead of their peers. But when some parents started to talk about “winning in the womb” and winning before conception, even highly competitive locals find that hard to swallow.

The flak came thick and fast. Complaints were filed with the local broadcasting regulator, especially over the latter saying, for its unabashed depiction of the male physiological process. Some mocked the parents who made the comments, asking why not consider “winning before reincarnation?”

But can we really blame the parents? If you must play the game and can't change the rules, either you play it with all the smart moves you can muster, or you lose. If you can't move the goal posts, you move the starting line. No?

But, of course, you can only move the starting line so far back, and moving it to the past life is, well, absurd, even by the most absurd standards. In any event, the

## Idiom by Lon Yan

latest ideas regarding giving children a head start in life can be described as “變本加厲” (*bian4 ben3 jia1 li4*) on the existing situation.

“變” (*bian4*) is “to become,” “to transform,” “to change,” “本” (*ben3*) “capital,” “principal,” “original,” “at first,” “加” (*jia1*) “to add,” “to increase” and “厲” (*li4*) “strict,” “stern,” “harsh.”

“變本加厲” (*bian4 ben3 jia1 li4*), literally, is “change original, add severity,” “to change to more severe,” “to become more intense with shortcomings,” “to aggravate.”

The idiom means “to get worse,” “to intensify one's effort to do something wrong.”

### Terms containing the character “厲” (*li4*) include:

厲害 (*li4 hai4*) – formidable; hard to deal with

嚴厲 (*yan2 li4*) – severe; harsh; stern

厲鬼 (*li4 gui3*) – a ferocious ghost

凌厲 (*ling2 li4*) – to advance fearlessly