

# Character Builder 您好嗎？

The basic unit of the Chinese language is the *zi* (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each *zi* has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string *zi* together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each *zi* is pronounced in one of four tones:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each *zi* below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about raising families

兒

Putonghua pronunciation: *er2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *yi4*

Meanings: child, son, noun-diminutive

兒 = 兒童 (*er2 tong2* = child-children). 兒子 (*er2 zi0* = child-son) = son, 女兒 (*nü3 er2* = female-child) = daughter, 兒女 (*er2 nü3* = sons-and-daughters). Grandparents have 兒孫 (*er2 sun1* = children-grandchildren). 小兒 (*xiao3 er2* = small-child) or father modestly saying “my son”. 孤兒 (*gu1 er2* = isolated-child) = orphan.

“Noun + 兒-diminutive” = childish/tenderly saying “petit/darling”: 狗兒 (*gou3 er0* = dog-diminutive = doggy), 月牙兒 (*yue4 ya2 er0* = moon-tooth-petit = slim arc of new/waning moon).

Parents have 兒女債 (*er2 nü3 zhai4* = sons-daughters-debts = onus/burden of supporting kids like they're your debtors), but nobody believes 養兒防老 (*yang3 er2 fang2 lao3* = raise-son-guard-old-age = having kids ensures you care/protection in old age).

by Diana Yue