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:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

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

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

4th 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 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” = childishly/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).

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