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 younger generation

Putonghua pronunciation: zhang 3
Cantonese pronunciation: jeung 2
Meanings: grow, elder, senior, head

Plants/animals 生長 (sheng1 zhang3 = born-grow). Kids 長高 (zhang3 gao1 = grow-taller), 長肉 (zhang3 rou4 = develop-flesh/muscles), 成長 (cheng2 zhang3 = mature-grow).

長 = senior: 家長 (jia1 zhang3 = family-senior = parents), 長子 (zhang2 zi3 = eldest-son), 長輩 (zhang3 bei4 = older-generation-members), 隊長 (dui4 zhang3 = squad’s-captain), 船長 (chuan2 zhang3 = ship’s-captain), church’s 長老 (zhang2 lao3 = elder-old = elders), army’s 長官 (zhang3 guan1 = senior-officers), district’s 首長 (shou2 zhang3 = heads-leaders). Disobedient subordinates 目無尊長 (mu4 wu2 zhun1 zhang3 = eyes-have-no-supreme-leader = ignore/disrespect authority).

Never help 不長進 (bu4 zhang3 jin4 = not-grow-progress = inert) kids by 拔苗助長 (ba2 miao2 zhu4 zhang3 = pull-up-young-shoots-help-grow = overly helping thus destroying them).

by Diana Yue