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 O.

This week: Words about kindergartens

Putonghua pronunciation: hu4
Cantonese pronunciation: woo6
Meaning: protect, defend, guard, escort, shield, safeguard, patronize

護 (radical 言 yan2, words) = 保護 (bao3 hu4 = preserve-protect): 護衛 (hu4 wei4 = protect-defend = guard), 護士 (hu4 shi4 = protect-person = nurse). Armor's 護心鏡 (hu4 xin1 jing4 = protect-heart-mirror) is metal-plate protecting chest. Fairy gives god-daughter 護身符 (hu4 shen1 fu2 = protect-body-charm).

護航 (hu4 hang2 = protect-sailing) describes warships escorting carrier or supporters backing political motion. St. Patrick is Ireland's 護國聖人 (hu4 guo2 sheng4 ren2 = protect-country-holy-man = patron saint). 護短 (hu4 duan3 = protect-short/ fault) means unfairly defending/patronizing unjustified person/cause.

護苗基金 (hu4 miao2 ji1 jin1 = protect-young-shoots-foundation-gold/money = foundation for children's well-being) funds kindergartens, advocates 愛護 (ai4 hu4 = loving-protecting), 哄護 (he1 hu4 = blow-air/coax-protect = tenderly protecting) toddlers.

by Diana Yue