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 children


Toddlers牙齿學語 (ya2 ya2 xue2 yu3 = “ya”~“ya”-learn-speech = try uttering speech sounds). 童言無忌 (tong2 yan2 wu2 ji4 = child’s-words-have-no-taboo) means children’s innocent/honest/unrestrained words/comments are pardonable. 童心猶在 (tong2 xin1 you2 zai4 = child’s-heart-still-there) describes fun-loving adult/oldster with kid’s temperament.


by Diana Yue