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

![Image of a character with pinyin and meanings]

**Character 哭**
Putonghua pronunciation: **ku 1**
Cantonese pronunciation: **huk 1**
Meanings: cry, weep

Character 哭 shows two eyes dropping 眼泪 (yan3 lei4 = eye's-tear). Penitent 痛哭 (tong4 ku1 = pain-cry = cries/weeps ruefully). Spanked child 大哭 (da4 ku1 = big-cry = cries loudly);
given candy, 破涕為笑 (po4 ti4 wei2 xiao4 = breaks-tears-becomes-laugh = turns from crying to smiling/laughing).

Babies 啼哭 (ti2 ku1 = chirp/crow-cry = wail-cry). 哭哭啼啼 (ku1 ku1 ti2 ti2 = cry-cry-wail-wail) describes cry-baby/crying nuisance. Person made fun of 哭笑不得 (ku1 xiao4 bu4 de2 = cry-laugh-not-have = can't cry/frown, can't smile = shows embarrassed expression).

Mourners 哭泣 (ku1 qi4 = cry-weep/sob). 貓哭老鼠假慈悲 (mao1 ku1 lao2 shu3 jia3 ci2 bei1 = cat-cries/mourns-old-mouse-false/pretend-kind-mercy): “Cat’s shedding tears for Mouse? His grief/pity is sheer pretense!”

by Diana Yue