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

Putonghua pronunciation: dai4
Cantonese pronunciation: daai3
Meanings: line, belt, lead, take, carry

帶 (radical 巾 jin1, scarf/kerchief) means line/belt: 腰帶 (yao1 dai4 = waist-belt), 裙帶 (qün2 dai4 = skirt-belt = nepotism).

Verb 帶 means carry/lead. Air 帶有 (dai4 you3 = contains-has) oxygen. Clouds 帶來 (dai4 lai2 = bring-along) rain. Dad 帶回 (dai4 hui2 = brings-home) pay/bread. Captain 帶領 (dai4 ling3 = lead-collars = leads) troops, 帶頭 (dai4 tou2 = lead-head = is first to) charge.

Mom/nanny 帶孩子 (dai4 hai2 zi0 = carry-child-diminutive = carries/looks after baby/child). Parents 帶淚 (dai4 lei4 = with-tears) or 帶笑 (dai4 xiao4 = with-laugh/smile) remember days of 拖男帶女 (tuo1 nan2 dai4 nü3 = drag-male/boy-carry-female/girl = kids in arms/at elbows), 帶大兒女 (dai4 da4 er2 nü3 = bring-big/grow-son-daughter = raising children).

by Diana Yue