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

玩 Putonghua pronunciation: wan 2
Cantonese pronunciation: woon 6
Meanings: play, treat frivolously

Kids 玩耍 (wan2 shua3 = play-play = play), 玩遊戲 (wan2 you2 xi4 = play-roam-game = play games), 貪玩 (tan1 wan2 = greedy/love-too-much-to-play). 玩具 (wan2 ju4 = play-instrument) = toy. Art-collectors 把玩 (ba3 wan2 = hold-play = handle/admire) antiques. Warning “別開玩笑!” (bie2 kai1 wan2 xiao4 = don’t-open-play-laugh) = “Don’t joke!”

電玩 (dian4 wan4 = electric-play = electronic games) is new 玩意 (wan2 yi4 = play-idea = plaything/hobby), may 玩上癮 (wan2 shang4 yin3 = play-mount/become-addicted).

Dandies 吃喝玩樂 (chi1 he4 wan2 le4 = eat-drink-play-joy/enjoy = lead epicurean lifestyle), 玩女人 (wan2 nu3 ren2 = play-woman-person = treat/keep women like toys/pets). Speeding drivers 玩命 (wan2 ming4 = play-with-life/fate = are playing with death).

by Diana Yue