

Westies and Children

4/18/10

Michigan Westie Rescue does not place rescued Westies with children under the age of ten. We find that many Westies have a difficult time with younger children and, in fact, this is often the reason we get them into Rescue. There was a time when we did try to do this but we found that the wait for a dog that might fit into a young family was sometimes two or more years. By then, most families had given up and gone on to another breed. And when we did place a dog into a family with children, it almost always came back. Over time our experience has led us to believe that placing rescued Westies with young children is just not a good thing to do. It isn't worth the risk of a bite to a child and the resulting consequences to the dog. People will often tell us, "But my child is gentle and mature". We are not saying that your child will not be good with a dog; we are saying that the dog is likely to not be good with your child. Consider that the rescued Westie often comes from an unknown background. We don't know his experiences before we got him. He may have been around children who were not good with Westies. Westies don't forget. He will not easily learn to trust a different child, even a gentle and mature one. And often, rescued Westies were not well socialized with children when they were young. Now that they are older, it is often too late to do the work necessary to make this a safe dog for children.

To learn more about Westies and children, please review the following:

- Our web site Album and Rescue Stories (Go to our website and choose "Our Westies" to get to the photo albums).
- The Westie Club of America site: <http://westieclubamerica.com> . Look at the quiz on the home page and also look at the Breed Information and FAQ sheet
- Look at Brian Kilcommons and Sarah Wilson's book, "Paws To Consider".
- Article "Preparing Westie for Baby" on our site and on <http://thedogspeaks.com> .

While some Westies can be great with kids, others are not. The problem comes in the fact that it is very difficult to know at the start just which puppies will be good with kids. If you are wrong, it can lead to heartbreak. To some extent the ability of a Westie to be with kids may relate to a good breeding program where the breeder is breeding for temperament as a major consideration. Also, a good breeder may have enough experience with puppies to be able to make a good judgment about the individual puppy's basic personality (you won't find this expertise in a pet store or from a puppy broker!) And to a large extent it has to do with how the Westie was raised, especially when it was very young. Even with all of this, you will need to make a real commitment to making it work. I'd suggest you read:

- "Childproofing Your Dog" by Brian Kilcommons and Sarah Wilson
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And do a lot of homework ahead of time about raising a dog with children.

When choosing a breed, you should always consider what they were bred to do. Westies were born and bred to "go to ground", trap and kill small critters. This was once their job and sole reason for existing. A lot of frantic movement and action tends to "get them going". A young child's activity can bring out the Westies' natural instincts. Often people will say, "The child didn't do anything to the dog and he bit her without provocation." This is often because most people do not recognize just what provocation is to a Westie. When the child is jumping on the couch and waving his hands and making noise, this can be provocation even though the Westie isn't directly involved. When the child walks past the food dish and the Westie hasn't been properly taught his "food manners", this can be provocation. When a person rushes towards one of the family members to hug them, the Westie may interpret this as aggression and attempt to defend his "person". And a Westie is a small dog with not a lot of patience for children who are pulling hair or hurting it in any way. Some larger dogs, such as a lab or retriever, will often lie there and let kids do almost anything. This is not a Westie's nature. Most Westies WILL defend themselves. (A retriever was bred to "retrieve" without doing injury to the bird; they are meant to have a very "soft" mouth. If I were looking for a dog to have around my child, would I want one who was bred to kill with its jaws or one that was bred to retrieve without doing injury?)

Always remember that a Westie's jaws are very large and powerful in contrast to its relatively small body. A Westie should never be left with young children unsupervised. You need to be able to be there to supervise whenever the dog is free and be committed to crating the dog when you can't supervise. (And you must make sure the children know that the crate is off limits at all times. This is the dog's "safe" place.) A Westie cannot be left free to run and play in an unfenced area. If your yard isn't fenced, and your kids want to play outside with the dog, the Westie must still be kept on leash.

Finally remember, that you not only have to train your own children on how to behave with a dog, you will also have to train all of the neighborhood children too. Some Westies come to us even though they are doing fine with the family children. But they have become overprotective and are nipping at and threatening to bite the neighborhood children when they are roughhousing.

And then there is the Westie who is just the opposite. He/she isn't the least bit aggressive. In fact the kids are so overwhelming to this type of Westie, that they will do their best to avoid the children. Often they will hide whenever the kids are around. Westies come into Rescue because the owners say, "He just wouldn't play with the kids"! They often feel the Westie should play "fetch". Some Westies live to play fetch with their ball. Other Westies seem to feel that fetching a ball is "beneath their dignity" and they wouldn't be caught considering such an activity. Westies are not "retrievers" by nature so if you have one who does enjoy a game of fetch, consider yourself fortunate.

Our experience with many dogs coming in to Rescue is that the owners understood that raising a puppy was a big job but they really believed they could handle it along with the raising of the young children. But when reality hits and the dog needs attention at the same time the child needs attention, it is the dog that always loses.

I am always sorry to discourage anyone from owning a Westie because they can be wonderful dogs BUT I feel it is my job to present to you this side of the issue. Hopefully you will take this information and continue your research before making a final decision.