

Westies and Children

As a general rule, Westies are not recommended for families with small children or small visiting grandchildren younger than 8 to 10 years of age. Granted, there are exceptions to every rule. The exceptions are dependent on three things: the individual dog, the individual child or children, and the level of supervision provided by the parents or grandparents. This applies to all dogs, but it is even more crucial with certain breeds, such as the terriers.

One major reason Westies are surrendered to rescue or shelters is because of issues involving small children. The noises and movements of infants, toddlers, and young children can elicit the Westie's intense prey drive and critter instincts. Examples of triggers include crying, squealing, high-pitched voices and running through the house. These behaviors can cause a Westie to chase, bark, growl, and nip at a child's hands or feet. The Westie may only want to play, but his play behaviors and sounds can scare a small child.

Westies may also perceive a small child as a lower-level pack member and try to dominate or correct the child for what the Westie perceives as inappropriate pack behavior. Westies have a relatively low threshold for having their hair, ears and tail pulled; being stumbled over or fallen or stepped on; hugged tightly; being hit; and above all, being kissed on the face. These normal child behaviors often elicit a warning snap (not intended to make contact) from your Westie. The dog does not intend to inflict harm, he is speaking dog for "not so hard, or not in my face." However, if the child has his or her face in the dog's face, unintentional contact can occur. Even if there is minimal or no actual contact, when parents see a dog snap at their young child, it is frightening and unacceptable. You cannot blame the parents for their reaction, but you cannot blame the dogs for their natural and instinctual reactions either.

When Westies seek refuge under or behind furniture, or retreat to their beds or crates, children will go after them to make them feel better or because the children still want to play. This is a prescription for disaster! Dogs perceive this as a threat or being cornered, which is always dangerous with any dog. Their initial reaction is to bare their teeth and growl, which is the dog's way of saying, "Please do not come any closer." This is a normal reaction when dogs feel cornered or threatened. If the child continues to encroach, the dog will give a warning snap to back the child off. If the encroachment continues, the dog is left with no other option but to bite.

Another possible source of trouble between children and Westies involves food. A child eating or reaching for food on the floor is often more temptation than a Westie can handle. The Westie may have no intention of biting the child, but they are going for that piece of food, which can inadvertently involve fingers and faces. Extreme vigilance and complete supervision is absolutely essential with any dog and child, especially a Westie.

Beth Bowling of Liberty, Ohio, a member of the West Highland White Terrier Club of America (WHWTCA), got her first Westie, Max, when her sons were 4 and 5 years old. Her second Westie, Betz, joined the family in May 2002. Bowling has responsibly integrated the Westies into her home with young, active boys. Her initial and continued success is directly correlated to understanding what owning a terrier and having small children truly means, along with maintaining constant and responsible vigilance. "The main thing I keep in mind is the terrier prey drive and their natural propensity to chase critters," Bowling explains. "Even though my sons, Kyle and Christopher, are now 6 and 7, I still watch Max because he can become overexcited when the boys start running through the house being loud. Betz is sound sensitive and can be overwhelmed by all the commotion. My boys understand how to behave around their Westies. However, I never forget that boys will be boys and Westies will be terriers! I never want these two realities to collide! At these times, I take Max and Betz to another room."

Even if your children are always appropriate with their Westies, their playmates may not be. “When the boys have friends visit, I want the Westies to meet them,” Bowling says. “After the initial interactions, I take Max and Betz to the bedroom because my boys and their friends will become very loud and active. I do not want to restrict their play and fun, nor do I want to subject my Westies to activities I know may stress Betz and overstimulate Max. We have not had an issue, but only because I do not allow a situation to culminate.”

For children 10 years or older, Westies can be marvelous playmates. Their energy levels will be a good match. Of course, parents should always be vigilant with their children and any dog. Adults should never leave a young child unsupervised with any dog. Always watch for signs that the dog needs to be left alone. Adults should ensure the children do not engage in activities that can cause the dog discomfort, pain, fear or a sense of being threatened, which can lead to the dog reacting with instinctual reflexes. When kids just need to be kids and if their dog is reactive to these situations or stimuli, make sure the dog is in another room.

—Deb Duncan

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