A Decision That Should Have Their Opinion: Teenagers Should Decide Their Custody Schedule.

Beginning at age thirteen, teenagers should have a say in their custody schedule, when living in two houses. Deciding where to live can increase mental and social health as well as allow teenagers to stick up for themselves or their beliefs, which can be hard to do at that age.

Divorce. When written out it has meaning, as all words do, but when it is your reality the meaning becomes deeper. Teenagers with divorced parents do not have it easy. They deal with bringing clothes back and forth to each house, communicating with the other parent for their parents, growing up with different parenting styles and rules, and much more. Parents should be willing to allow their teenagers to decide which parent to live with. Choosing who to live with, at least for the majority of their time, can ease some of the stress and anxiety teenagers experience that they did not ask for.

As a teenager, picking up your life every “switch day” is a whole different kind of hard. Allowing teens to choose the day they want to do that or if at all that week can improve their mental health. Packing up all of your belongings is not easy because it brings up old emotions that eventually leave your mind as you settle into the week at that parents house, but that does not make it any easier. Allowing teens to decide when or if they want to pack up their whole life that week and move to another parent's house can decrease anxiety by feeling a sense of control over their life when normally having control of life is not realistic for them. The NIH National Library of Medicine says, “having a strong sense of control over one’s life actions, and environments significantly reduces anxiety levels”. Having control over a situation helps the brain relax and decrease that fight or flight, or fear response. When teenagers can control their situation and no one is making them feel bad for it, their anxiety can significantly decrease.

With divorced parents it is common to have to communicate from one parent to the other for them. This is something teenagers should not have to do for their parents. For example, “Ask your dad if he is going to your game tonight and let me know,” “tell your mom I have the money for my half of that dress you wanted” and much more. It gets exhausting. There is a pressure behind it that is not talked about but it’s there. Imagine that there is an important paper you have to bring from one house to the next. Then add the anxious thoughts about switching houses and trying not to forget that one thing you thought of three hours ago you need to pack. Now you’re no longer thinking about that paper you need to bring. After forgetting the paper you will of course feel bad for forgetting but there is a good chance you will also be getting in trouble or making a parent upset for not remembering. But if it’s so important shouldn't the parents just take the papers themselves? Yes, because it causes anxiety to have unneeded pressure on teenagers.

What about comfort and different parenting styles or rules? Some parents may argue that teenagers only want control of their schedule to live with the parent that lets them stay up late or allow them to date, or throw a party. But I believe that is called trust. When parents trust their teenagers and allow them to have control and make their own decisions, make mistakes and fix them, teenagers are not as rebellious or untrustworthy as one may think. It's not the rules that one parent does or does not have that makes teenagers want the switch, it's the parent that buys the birthday card, the parent that trusts them to go get coffee with their friends; it's the parent that you can ask for something you need, not want and know that they will buy it for you. Comfort at a certain parent's house is a big key in teenagers' lives. Most teens would not ask a parent to allow them to spend more time at the opposite parent's house if they did not need it for their comfort or mental health because telling a parent you are uncomfortable or sad at their house can naturally cause anxiety because teenagers will do anything to not make your parents mad at you, right?

Teenagers with divorced parents carry so much weight. Most of the time it goes unnoticed, because if a teenager is tired, anxious or in a bad mood, they are now "lazy or unmotivated". When truthfully behind that emotion is just a person trying their best living the life they did not choose. Allowing teenagers to have a say in their custody schedule should not even make parents think twice. Even if parents do not understand why their teenagers want more control of their custody schedule or understand why a teenager wants to spend less time at one house, if they are asking for control and the ability to be less anxious, it is the right decision for them.