Now here's a concept: Going on a date without having sex

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Every February, just in time for Valentine's Day, Hollywood delivers that wonderful cinematic confection known as the "date movie." This year it was called "Hitch," a charming tale with a preposterous premise.

Popular black actor Will Smith plays a "date doctor" who helps clueless and unappealing guys from every walk of life woo the women of their dreams.

Yeah, right. Watching the film, I felt like writing a memo to Hollywood producers: "Hey fellas, if you want to make lots of money while doing some good in the real world, next time have the date doctor help African-American women find good dates. They really deserve it."

If marriage is in crisis today, nowhere is that more evident than in the African-American community: In 1970, 68 percent of African-Americans were married. By 1994, that number had dropped to 48 percent. The nonmarital birth rate in black communities is 69 percent. If, as more and more research indicates, marriage is good for children and good for adults, shouldn't we find ways to reverse this troubling trend?

Recently, I've been engaged in a project sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation to improve the life prospects of black youth in low-income communities, including how to encourage fathers and mothers to be more responsible for their children. During a focus group of urban pastors, one pastor spoke up: "Our kids don't know how to go out on a healthy, innocent date that doesn't involve sex. They don't understand the difference between dating for simple companionship and dating to select a potential mate. We need to revive a culture of healthy dating and healthy relationships."

The pastor's comment was validated by others who blamed the awful models of dating that all American kids are exposed to in rap videos, fashion photography and television sitcoms. As a result of these messages, they said, many kids assume that a date has to involve sex. Some young people report feeling pressure to have sex (of some kind) and are teased if they don't conform. This is what passes for "sex in the city" nowadays.

If this is the new culture of dating in some African-American communities and beyond, then we adults have a huge task before us. We must teach these kids the lifelong
consequences of having a child before they have completed their education and acquired a good job. They also must understand the risks of acquiring HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The pastors admitted that their churches had done little to promote a "culture of healthy dating." Consequently, they could not be overly critical when kids got things wrong. Pastors also admitted that churches need curricula, resources and training to help build healthy relationships.

As if television images and peer pressure weren't enough, further complicating the culture of dating in low-income communities is President Bush's new marriage promotion policy, which seems to bypass the topic of healthy dating in a rush to "close the deal." The intentions of policy-makers may be good, but their policies look pretty nave alongside a complicated environment of joblessness, poor education and dating illiteracy.

There is some good news. Black pastors are starting to get excited about the positive role their churches can play in teaching young people appropriate dating habits. They understand that healthy dating is one of the keys to rebuilding strong black families.

And, teen pregnancy rates have been declining over the past decade. Clearly, calling public attention to this crisis, enlisting our strongest institutions and communicating our expectations to kids consistently can make a difference.

But black pastors can't do this alone. I challenge leaders from all organizations --- corporations, historically black colleges and universities, nonprofit organizations --- to convene a community-wide conversation about the future of our children and the practical steps, values, practices and organizations that are needed to redirect our course.

If we get this right, we won't need many "date doctors." Everyone will understand that respect, honesty and wholesome affection are better than wine and roses.

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